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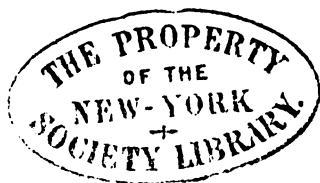
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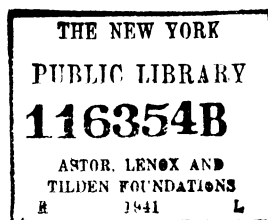
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THE IMPEDIMENT.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

AT eighteen the dominant note in Jessie Drummond's character was discontent.

Her home was beautiful of its kind, but far too dull and far too narrow for her taste.

What you saw in approaching St. Mallan's from the East was a pre-Reformation spire, piercing through a jumble of red roofs which climbed up the shore from out of a deep little harbour, enclosed very much like a cup in the rocky lips of the coast. Only herring-boats and crafts waiting for potato cargoes lay here nowadays, though there had been a time when quite a flourishing trade had been carried on between the little Scotch sea-town and both France and the Netherlands. At the very extremity of the harbour, looking almost as though it were but anchored there and ready to go out to sea any moment, there towered the grey old castle, which was the chief feature of the spot, and round whose base a massive double terrace ran, with only a railing to keep the admirer of the sea-view from falling a few hundred feet down among the rocks and the sea-gulls, forever dipping in and out of their grey shadows. From time imme-

morial the lower of those terraces had been considered public property, and be the weather what it liked, its broad surface was seldom free of old and young sailors in blue jerseys, scanning the horizon with telescopes, shaking their heads and spitting eloquently, and either telling each other stories of "old, unhappy, far-off days," or else listening to them.

Inland the main street ran East and West, planted with wind-swept chestnuts, with only the jutting-out face of an old inn and the square tower of the little townhall to break the monotony of windows furnished with white curtains and geranium pots, together with a sprinkling of respectable, but not precisely exciting shops. Beyond the last houses the street turned into a road, with, to the left, a waste of rocks, to the right the links stretching away toward low grassy hills. Having come out by the straight road, you could, for a variety—supposing you were young and nimble—scramble back again by a narrow up-and-down path along the shore, with the spray dashing in front of you over beds of pink sea-pinks and yellow bedstraw.

So much for the general surroundings of Jessie's home, and now for the home itself.

Despite her dissatisfaction with it, it did not lack a certain character of its own. From the street side—it was not much of a street here—the house looked like a rather dull little cottage, but having crossed the threshold, you were pleasantly surprised by the exquisite sea-pictures framed in each little old-fashioned window, and seen from all sorts of different levels, since, owing to some strange



architectural whim, scarcely two rooms were built on exactly the same plane, having probably been added on at different dates, and being connected by means of queer and unexpected little flights of stairs, which were forever leading you up and down and around corners and occasionally into the small back garden. From this side a species of wooden gallery led to what had once been a tannery, but was now unused—a separate wing, consisting only of two large wooden spaces, one on the top of the other with rounded ends jutting out over the water.

It was the tannery that was Jessie's special haunt. From the upper room she could stare out over the sea undisturbed and to her heart's content, and wonder what there was at the other side; while from the lower, a few steps led straight down to the water, and to the boat that was always lying ready, so that it was possible either to take a bath or to start on a private boating expedition, without being interfered with.

In Jessie's own opinion it was quite unfair of fate to have made her the daughter of a small country doctor, and of one, moreover, who had settled down so unresistingly into the sphere in which declining fortune had landed an ancient and once prosperous family. It was in this lower sphere too that Thomas Drummond had married, and to his marriage, more than to any personal inclination, he owed his profession, having adopted it principally in order to please old Dr. Brail, who wished his daughter's husband to inherit his own well-secured practice. Easy-going and amiable, intellectual, but not robustly so, Dr. Drummond had never

risen above the level of the average country doctor, and was not likely to do so. Among his patients he was liked, more because of his courteous manners and suave address, than because of anything remarkable in the way of skill, and was in general better known for his true kindness of heart than for the cures he had wrought. His best friends said of him that he was too much of a gentleman to succeed in his profession, and perhaps they were right, for how can a doctor prosper who considers his patient's personal wishes almost as much as the necessities of a case, and who forgets to send in his bill unless reminded to do so?

These were truths which no one knew better than Jessie, and no one fretted against more hotly, for that to which the father had so easily resigned himself, the daughter—owing, perhaps, to some spasmodic revival of those hereditary instincts which we are told it requires seven generations to extinguish, or else simply to her individuality—had rebelled against ever since she could remember anything. There had been a time indeed when she had nursed sanguine hopes, for a doctor can become celebrated as well as anybody else. A single sensational cure might lift the family name from the obscurity into which it was fast sinking. When still in the schoolroom she had done her best to fire the paternal ambition; but alas! without effect.

"Why do you not discover something?" she would say at this time to her father. "Other doctors are always discovering things and getting talked about."

"But when did I say that I wanted to be talked

about?" retorted Dr. Drummond, laughing gently, as he almost always did when Jessie came out with what he called her "theories."

"You *ought* to want it. Your ancestors were talked about enough in their day, though, of course, about different things. They were *somebody*, and we are *nobody*, and that is what I cannot stand."

"And what do you want a poor nobody like me to discover?" asked Dr. Drummond, still smiling indulgently.

"I don't care what—anything you like. You might find out that draughts are the best cure for rheumatism, or that boiled sea-weed contains more nourishment than beefsteaks, and thus revolutionise the social question."

"Or that little girls are cleverer than their elders," put in Jem, with an explosive laugh.

"It doesn't matter what, if only you get talked about and become *somebody*," finished Jessie, supremely disregarding her brother's remark.

Unless her temper got the better of her she never paid any attention to what Jem said. It was impossible not to love him, because of his being so kind and so true, and also because he loved her so much, but also it was impossible to approve of him entirely. In his way he was quite as excellent a person as his father, but much less attractive, both physically and mentally—bigger, heavier, cast altogether in a commoner mould—his gait an inelegant roll, his voice an unmodulated trumpet, his laugh a guffaw—more stolid also and without that charm of manner which made Dr. Drummond so acceptable at a bedside. Jem, too, was going to be a doctor, simply because it seemed easiest and least

trouble to follow in his parent's footsteps, and this resolve formed a standing sore point between the brother and sister. All that it had been possible to do to persuade him into adopting some other profession with more potentialities in it, had been done, but to no purpose. The son's ambition was as hard to rouse as the father's. At this rate the Drummonds would unavoidably settle down into one of those regular humdrum doctor's families, which seemed to Jessie the quintessence of provincial dulness. Already the son stood on a lower level than the father, as her quick sensibilities angrily felt—to what further levels might the name not sink?

"And are you quite sure that the *somebodies* are better off than the *nobodies*?" the doctor asked now.

"I don't know if they are better off, but at least they don't die without anybody being aware that they have ever lived, and at least they haven't been buried in a hole all their lives. Oh, if only I were a man!" and she clasped her hands together vehemently, heaving a stormy sigh.

"It's almost a pity she can't change clothes with me, isn't it, father?" said Jem, with another shout of laughter which sent a shiver right down Jessie's back.

"You're horribly rude, Jem!" she said, flouncing out of the room, with tears of vexation in her beautiful eyes, and making her way straight to the tannery. In the evening of course Jem would beg her pardon humbly, and the tears would possibly be in his eyes then, but that did not make the moment easier to bear.

It was generally in this way that these discussions ended, and it was generally in the old tannery that she took refuge in her worse moods. By some tacit agreement the place was considered sacred to herself, except at these times when the charitably inclined doctor turned it into an impromptu hospitable ward, by housing there some stray high-road tramp who had met with an accident, or some pauper patient whom he had picked out of the street. Here she had played about on rainy days as a little girl, and here, too, with volumes of Scott and of Bulwer by her side, she had succeeded in inflaming almost to fever point an originally singularly inflammable imagination, and had nursed big the aspirations which at present coloured her existence. Perhaps it was the wide horizon, the unbounded line of water and sky which had first awakened the fretful dislike to being chained to one spot, or perhaps the chronic sight of those twin towers, so proudly dominating the waters—ever recalling to her mind the fact that her ancestors too had owned a home as stately as this—had helped to foster that sort of dreamy ambition which grows up best in solitude. Having never known her mother, she had lacked that imperceptibly working feminine touch so indispensable to the moulding of character. Her father and brother had teased and spoiled her alternately, and, dating from nursery days, had enjoyed nothing so much as putting her into a passion and then suffocating her with caresses, by way of coaxing her back into good humour. With the best intentions in the world they had brought her up in the worst possible way for a girl to be brought up in. The only

feminine influence she had ever known had not been entirely favourable, for Aunt Mina, though perfectly harmless, was singularly little attractive, and with no visible tenderness about her. The only person of whom it was known for certain that Miss Brail had ever experienced affection for, was her sister Alice, and either the affection had been too great or the heart which had given it had been too small, for that one passion of her life had apparently exhausted her faculties in that direction. Jessie knew quite well that her aunt not only did not love her but had even a personal grievance against her, as having been the innocent cause of her mother's premature death, and this knowledge served only to stifle anything like warmth of attitude on her part; for her disposition was one which could indeed give much, but which asked for much in return. Besides, the whole appearance of the angular, wooden-faced spinster—beginning with her cloth shoes and ending with her black velvet hairband—was a trial to Jessie's capricious taste, as well as a weariness to her restless spirit. Her mere presence, and even the size of her pocket-handkerchiefs, and even her manner of handling her knife at table, and most of all the generous breadth of her accent were a constant reminder of the step downward which had been taken in the social scale, while the unbeautiful, unchanging face, and the neutral-tinted eyes which never sparkled and never shone, never laughed and never wept, weighed upon the lively girl with a curious sense of depression. Sometimes her aunt seemed to her as a living warning of what she herself might sink into if she had the bad luck to remain stranded at St.

Mallan's, and in these moments she would vow to herself to marry the first man who gave her the chance of getting away.

Except in these moments, however, she was not at all sure that she meant to marry. It was not to that that she looked for deliverance more than to any other fortunate chance. Despite her lively imagination, she was for her age singularly unromantic, or rather was passing through an unromantic phase. A perusal of some of her father's medical books—since there was no one to forbid her the shelves—had opened her eyes a good deal wider than are those of most young ladies of her age, or at least seemed to herself to do so, and the conclusion she had come to during a brief craze for scientific study was, that what people call love, though a very pretty poet's dream, does not really exist, and that for a sensible girl it ought to be quite enough to respect the man she marries. On other subjects her ideas were less defined. What it was exactly that she wanted she did not quite know—whether position alone, or money also, or merely change—a wider scope, a bigger horizon, a greater variety of interests. All she knew was that she had not got what she required, that she longed to get away from this spot where there were always and always the same faces around her, and where nothing ever happened. The only thing at all like an adventure had taken place when she was barely sixteen, and it was not much of an adventure either; for though it had been rather exciting at the moment to find herself stranded by her runaway boat on the little rocky island on which she had landed to collect seaweed for her new aquarium,

and decidedly amusing to be rescued by a total stranger whom she could only suppose to be a visitor at Craigie Towers, still the absence of any real danger—since the bay had been as still as a mill-pond—had been fatal to romance, and the incident had remained but an incident, totally without significance to her almost ridiculously childish mind. Besides, to tell the truth, the opportune rescuer had been painfully young and rather bony, and had had very little to say for himself, so little that Jessie, after having attempted in vain to arouse his interest in the harvest of seaweeds which she was bringing home with her and with which she had generously littered his boat, had ended in her own mind by voting him a bore.

That had been two years ago, and she had neither seen nor heard of him since, nor—the excitement of the incident once subsided—thought of him either, for the matter of that.

At this time she was eighteen, and irregularly, but not the less seductively beautiful, with long supple limbs, and hair of a curiously unequal colour, showing abrupt patches of reddish or yellowish gold upon the warm brown undertone, as though close strands or even single golden threads had been here and there woven into the thick plaits. The tints of her complexion, richer than those usually seen under a northern sky, seemed to be forever coming and going, in contradistinction to those faces on which the colour is as immovable as paint; and this contrast of tints in both hair and complexion tended to give to her beauty a certain ever shifting variety, which would not allow the interest, once aroused, to flag for one moment.

The eyes, too, were equally brilliant and equally hard to define—eyes full of hope and of life—almost as blue as sapphires, almost as green as some lake in the heart of the hills, or as the pools which the tide left behind it among the salt-encrusted rocks. Not even the shadow of discontent, which at this period of her life would try to darken them, could make those eyes otherwise than beautiful.

CHAPTER II.

ON a certain golden September day, Jessie, seated in her old weather-beaten boat, was pulling lazily towards the landing-steps. She had been away for hours, having made a regular afternoon of it among the rocks, and even now was returning reluctantly, driven home more by the craving of a remarkably healthy appetite and the consciousness that tea must be waiting, than by any wish for rest or society. Of the latter there would not be much available, at any rate, since Jem was playing golf and her father had been called away during luncheon to a patient—not one of his standing cases, but some stranger on his way through St. Mallan's, who had fallen from his bicycle (or so she had understood) and had been brought to the inn. From there Dr. Drummond would no doubt go on to pay his regular visits, from which he rarely returned before dark. Jessie, therefore, could see no reason for hurrying, since Aunt Mina's sole society was scarcely tempting.

Having made fast the boat, she stood hesitating for a moment at the foot of the wooden flight which led up into the upper space of the old tannery, and then began quickly to mount. She would take just one look at the sunset before joining Aunt Mina. There was no place for seeing sunsets like that

upper window, and there was going to be something quite especial in the way of sunsets to-day. Already the mother-o'-pearl clouds were beginning to take on their under-sides a certain amber tint which she knew well and had often revelled in. There was no door to open, since the stairs led straight into the middle of the floor, and having run lightly up the crazy, creaking steps, she had advanced several paces towards the semi-circular extremity of the room when, hearing a sound behind her, she turned round and instantly stood still in consternation.

It seemed almost as though she had come to a wrong place. In the further corner of the big empty space, furnished as a rule only with her own rocking-chair and a couple of tables littered with books and needle-work, there now stood a bedstead, and not an empty one either, since even in the gloom of the distant corner she could distinguish a black head on the pillow, and—oh horror!—was that not a moustache?—while on her private work-table, pushed alongside, there stood a bottle and a spoon, and apparently some bandage soaking in a basin.

For a full half minute astonishment kept her fixed to the spot, her back to the broad window filled with sunset light, her face towards the dark corner, then suddenly recollecting herself, she turned and fled again down the staircase, more in indignation than confusion, and determined to call her injudicious father to account. It was some time now since the tannery had been used as accident ward, so long that Jessie had forgotten that any one but herself had a right to its occu-

pation, and she had no thought of giving up her claim.

"He's picked up some tramp again," she said to herself, as she rapidly traversed the gallery towards the house. "A drunk one, probably, and I'm to give up my place to him, forsooth!"

Her eyes were shining ominously as she entered the room where Dr. Drummond was mixing something in a tumbler.

"Father, what *can* this mean?" she began, in a high-pitched tone of irritation. "There's a person in the tannery—I do believe it's a man, too! You surely might have asked me first—and just this week, when I have got a new packet of books!"

"I couldn't ask you because you were not there, my love," said the doctor mildly, as he measured out his draught. "And, besides, you could not have done anything but acquiesce, surely, since there was no other place to put him, and I know you would not have been so heartless as to turn him out. The poor man has had a bad fall from his bicycle, and since he is evidently quite a stranger, and the people at the inn were not looking after him a bit properly, I really had no choice but to bring him home with me, so as to have him under my eye."

"*You* had no choice, perhaps," said Jessie, rebelliously, "but another doctor would have had plenty of other choices. So he isn't a tramp, after all?"

"I have no notion what he is, except that he is evidently an Englishman. He has very little luggage with him, and his clothes are so soaked with

dust that it's quite impossible to judge of their quality. He seems rather shy and very grateful for being looked after. I shouldn't wonder if he is some schoolmaster out on a holiday trip."

"How long will he have to stay here?"

"He must lie for a fortnight at least," said the doctor, almost apologetically.

Jessie heaved an impatient sigh. The picture of the poor schoolmaster come to grief on his holiday trip had already seized on her fancy, and, in spite of herself, had considerably tempered her indignation, but she was far yet from feeling cheerful.

"He seems an unlucky individual altogether," added Dr. Drummond, perhaps purposely. "He doesn't look strong, and has lost an eye, probably through some previous accident."

"Poor man!" said Jessie, impulsively. "I hope he'll get well soon, for my own sake as well as his," she added, emphatically. "Has he really hurt himself badly?"

"Pretty badly. He must be suffering tortures, though I can't get him to admit it, and he persistently answers 'A little,' when I ask him if his foot is hurting. He promises to be the best patient I have ever had."

"Poor man!" said Jessie again, and more warmly. "Can I help you with those bandages, or anything? It was rather funny, after all, my bursting in upon him in that way!" And by the sound of her laugh her father knew that her temper was finally restored.

Before night there was another trying moment to go through—that of Jem's return and of his

somewhat elephantine jokes concerning her irruption into the sick-room. But the feeling of pity which her father's words had aroused in Jessie succeeded in keeping the upper hand. Her imagination, in truth, was as easily touched as her temper was roused, and if she did not dream of the poor schoolmaster that night, it was only because at that period of her robust youth it was her habit not to dream at all.

Next day, however, had a surprise in store. Already the sight of the boots which Eliza had just done blacking, and which met her eye as she passed the kitchen door, had given her a slight shock of surprise. Somehow they did not look like the sort of boots which a schoolmaster would be likely to wear: neither leather nor laces appeared to be of the quality which his salary might be expected to afford, and the general aspect of the tweed coat, now freed of the yesterday's layer of roadside dust, only went to support this impression. But it was not till towards midday that the veil was finally lifted.

The patient had passed a feverish night, as her father had told Jessie, in answer to inquiries, and was evidently suffering great pain. Broad daylight had come before he fell into a natural slumber, from which, after some hours, he awoke somewhat refreshed.

"If it is not too much trouble," he said, almost diffidently, when pressed by the doctor with regard to his wishes, "I should beg you to send round to the post office and ask for any letters that may have come for me. My name is Alington," he added, looking to one side.

A quarter of an hour later Eliza was back with two letters in her hand.

"Maun it be thaase?" she asked, incredulously, as she handed them to Dr. Drummond.

The doctor took them and said "Hem!" in so curious a tone that Jessie felt compelled to come and look over his shoulder.

*"Sir Augustus Alington, Bart.,
Poste restante,
St. Mallan's,
N.B."*

she read out aloud, and then father and daughter looked at each other, slightly bewildered.

"He certainly said his name was Alington," remarked the doctor, doubtfully eyeing the letters.

"Go and try them on him," decided Jessie; "you'll soon see if they're really his."

"Yes, they are really his," was the doctor's report on his return from the sick-room. "He took them quite as a matter of course."

"Then this is our poor schoolmaster," said Jessie, making a queer little grimace. "By the by, why did we decide that he was a schoolmaster?"

"I can't say. Something in his manner, I suppose."

"I should have thought a schoolmaster's manner was, as a rule, all that could be desired," remarked Miss Brail, in her flat voice, which at moments like this betrayed a very little sharpness.

"For a schoolmaster, yes, but not for—other people."

"I suppose the distinction escapes me," said Aunt Mina, pointedly.

"I suppose so," agreed Jessie, with a toss of her golden-brown head.

Miss Brail pressed her bloodless lips so tightly together that they almost disappeared, stiffening the while, all over. There was something about the absence of curves in her elongated figure, as well as in the fashion of her gowns, which irresistibly reminded Jessie of the personages in a Noah's Ark. Representing, as she knew she did, the plebeian side of the family, she lived in the chronic suspicion of being looked down upon by the better born side, and the impossibility of sympathising with Jessie's aspirations after a higher level—since this level seemed to her all that could be desired—had done much to keep aunt and niece apart, while many a thoughtless utterance of Jessie's had served to foster the mutual feeling of antagonism.

The discovery of the patient's true station in life was to Jessie a distinct disappointment. She had been wasting her pity. To give up the tannery to an indigent schoolmaster was quite another thing from giving it up to a probably wealthy and pampered baronet, who would of course turn up his nose at the rustic accommodation. It was impossible to feel now as though she were performing an act of charity. The circumstance had lost all its attending interest, and sank once more to the level of a simple bother.

The ten days that followed found her in one of her most restless humours, which even the continued fine weather and constant boating expedi-

tions—since there was no place to sit in comfortably at home—could not entirely dissipate. Sometimes when passing through the ground floor of the tannery on her way to the landing-steps, she would hear her father's voice above, and a strange voice speaking in reply, or sometimes she would meet Aunt Mina's Noah's Ark figure, with a cup or a plate in her hands, for Aunt Mina was as good a sick-nurse as she was a housekeeper, though she fulfilled the one duty exactly as she did the other, with strict conscientiousness, but without either enthusiasm or tenderness.

Then there came a day when the most comfortable of the sofas disappeared out of the sitting-room, and that same afternoon Jessie, glancing at the upper window as she drew towards the landing-place, saw a strange face behind the panes—a curiously long face with black hair parted on a sallow forehead, and with a black bandage covering one eye. As she looked up the face shrank back nervously, as though afraid of being seen.

That evening Jessie said to her father :

“He is up now, isn't he, your precious patient? Surely he will be clearing the premises soon?”

“Not quite so very soon, since he can't use his foot yet, and he still has occasional attacks of faintness; but he is improving.”

Next day when Jessie was passing the foot of the staircase, she heard a shuffling sound above and then her father's voice saying sharply :

“Is that you, Mina? Come and help me if you can.”

Jessie, a little alarmed, ran up the staircase.

“It is I, father. Has anything happened?”

"Nothing very bad; only another fainting fit. Made a false movement with his foot, I suppose. Here, just see if you're strong enough to help me; we can get him to the sofa together, I think."

Jessie was strong enough to have done even more than that, and presently the patient, shaken but not quite unconscious, was propped against the cushions of the sofa, and Jessie, standing beside her father, was able to satisfy the unavoidable touch of curiosity which even anger against the intruder had not been able quite to stifle.

She saw that he was a man of probably between thirty and forty, though at this moment, when in contrast to his black hair and to the black bandage, the elongated face looked almost ghastly, it was hard to define his age—tall and somewhat narrow-shouldered, with delicate, long-fingered hands, and a scanty black moustache.

It was Jessie who held the *sal-volatile* to his quivering nostrils, and it was upon her that his glance first fell when the heavy lid was raised.

"Just stop for one minute while I go for some drops," said the doctor in an undertone. "He is coming round now."

"All right," said Jessie, and sat down beside the sofa.

As her father's step descended the wooden stairs the one eye of the patient—a small, but intensely black eye—was fixed hard upon her face. If it had not been for his not being entirely conscious yet, this intensity of gaze might have become offensive, but probably he did not quite know yet what he was doing—so Jessie told herself.

"Are you in pain?" she asked by way of an experiment.

The pale face reddened faintly about the temples and the black eye turned aside, apparently in confusion.

"Not now, thank you; it is over now."

He spoke still a little faintly, then paused for a moment, as though to gather strength, and during that pause the eye came back to her face.

"It was you, was it not," he began, hesitatingly, "who came into the room that first day after I had been brought in here? I can recognise you only by your hair, for you were standing against the light."

"Yes, of course it was I. I had no notion there was any one in here. There usually is nobody but me and my books."

"Then I was in the way? I thought I should be. I have been keeping you out of here."

He looked so painfully distressed that Jessie felt forced to say warmly: "No, you were not in the way, since you needed the room more than I did. I won't deny that I was put out just at first, but when I heard how ill you were I forgave you almost immediately."

"That was very good of you," he said, gratefully. "I promise you that I shall do all I can to get out of the way as soon as possible. It is terrible to give so much trouble as this!" And he sighed a little fretfully, while again his dark eye returned irresistibly to her face.

"You—you are Dr. Drummond's daughter, I suppose?"

"Naturally," said Jessie, laughing like a child. "How could I be anything else?"

And at that moment Dr. Drummond's head appeared again at the head of the stairs.

Dating from that afternoon Jessie fell quite naturally into the habit of helping her father in the care of the convalescent, or taking her turn with Aunt Mina in sitting beside his sofa, and even of beguiling the long inactive afternoons with reading to him bits out of the paper, or talking to him about her excursions. And, strangely enough, the feeling of pity which the first mention of this man had awakened in her, came back again, little by little, and more strongly than ever; it was difficult exactly to say why, for the want of an eye alone could not quite explain the feeling of compassion which his whole personality inspired. There was about him a curious want of self-confidence, which rooted either in a physical delicacy of constitution or in some inherent diffidence of nature. Neither position nor money—and, to judge from the remittance which had reached him early in his stay, his pecuniary position was as good as his social—seemed able to reassure him as to his personal importance. Now that Jessie knew him it seemed to her quite comprehensible that her father should have taken him for a schoolmaster. That sort of bashfulness which is as real as a disease, sometimes seen in very young men, but rarely surviving twenty-five, and according ill with the lines which already marked his narrow forehead, and the single white hairs that here and there contrasted sharply with the black, resulted in a singular awkwardness of manner which amounted to a quite exceptional *gaucherie*. "All his fingers seem to be thumbs," Dr. Drummond had said of him very early in their ac-

quaintance, and although Jessie did not know the history of his lost eye, she instantly took for granted that he had somehow lost it through his own awkwardness; and she guessed rightly too, since, as a matter of fact, he had shot it out himself as a very young man at his first *battue*. The accident had tended to make his diffident nature yet more uncertain of itself, and though Jessie did not know this, she saw that, position or no position, he was one of the unfortunates of the earth—what the St. Mallan's people would have called a "puir body"—and her naturally impressionable feelings turned pityingly towards him, all the more readily as, despite the want of personal assertion, there was absolutely nothing despicable about the man. He might be awkward, but he was certainly not mean, so much her woman's instinct told her. From her father she knew already that he could be patient and strong under pain, and a man who can be this can never be entirely weak. Very soon she was quite as sorry for the baronet as she had ever been for the schoolmaster.

About his personal appearance, too, there was nothing prepossessing, since the long leathery-looking face, with the thin black hair parted in the middle like that of a woman, and the slightly depressed angles of the mouth, bordered very nearly on the grotesque, and only the tall, narrow-shouldered figure, if carried with more assurance, might possibly have deserved the epithet of elegant, whereas, under present circumstances, it came more naturally under the head of "gawky."

Soon the convalescent ceased to be confined to his own quarters, and would, with Jessie's assist-

ance, hobble over to the little sitting-room, although never without excusing himself profusely in his nervously courteous manner for the intrusion, and not without an occasional stumble on the unexpected little steps which connected the rooms with each other. Apparently he had forgotten his declaration of wanting to get out of the way as soon as possible, and Jessie saw no reason for reminding him of it. The care she had undertaken—and whatever she undertook she did with a certain intensity—was a pleasant break in the monotony of daily life, and her propensity for revelling in vivid emotions had found a certain outlet in what she considered a work of mercy—and this with not a single afterthought. It had never once occurred to her to think of Sir Augustus as a young man. His one eye—let alone the rest of him—seemed quite enough to put him out of the category. She was quite astonished when one day she learned casually that he was only past thirty.

“Do you mean that seriously?” she had asked, with obvious incredulity.

Sir Augustus reddened, as he had an unfortunate habit of doing on the smallest provocation.

“Certainly,” he said, a trifle stiffly. “I suppose you took me for more?” And he looked at her with his one eye full of anxiety.

“Well, you see you were looking ill when I saw you first,” said Jessie, vaguely aware of having hurt his feelings.

“I never look well,” he replied, almost bitterly.

These signs of distress always made Jessie redouble her solicitude, with the intention of being only kind, and unaware of how cruel she really was.

There were moments indeed, when looking up suddenly from her work, she was momentarily startled by the reflection as of a deep-lying flame in the black eye fixed upon her, as well as by the sudden reddening of the colourless forehead, but she had nothing to compare these symptoms with, never yet having been wooed, and the thought that this man could ever dream of wooing her seemed to lie too far outside the sphere of possibilities to be taken into serious consideration. It is true that his hands were sometimes hot and sometimes cold, but this she unhesitatingly put down to a remnant of fever, and treated him accordingly.

It was one of the last days of the month which brought the truth to light.

"Are you fond of shrimps?" Jessie had asked Sir Augustus abruptly that afternoon; "because I am, and I should like to have some for supper, and if you are too, you might come and help me to collect them. You're quite well enough for a row now, I should think, and even for a walk."

"I shall be happy to assist you," he answered, a trifle ceremoniously. For several days past he had been looking less well, and to-day he had come down to breakfast with the heavy look about the eyes of a man who has not slept. Jessie had noticed it at once, and it had been partly because she considered that the row would do him good that she had proposed the shrimps. There was no one to prevent her carrying out her prescription, since the doctor was out and Aunt Mina was accustomed not to be consulted.

The day was cloudy, though not cold, but the breeze began to quicken slightly as they left the

shore behind them. Jessie laughed and set her teeth, throwing herself well into her oars.

"I like a little opposition, don't you? That wind wants to keep me away from the shrimp island, but it won't succeed. I mean to show you all my haunts before you go away."

"I shall be going away very soon," replied Sir Augustus, in the stiff tone he had been speaking in all day.

"I suppose so," said Jessie, with unconscious heartlessness. "No doubt you are wanted at home."

"It is not that, but I feel that it would be—better. I am not wanted here any more than there, surely."

"Oh, you mustn't say that," replied Jessie, impulsively. "We have become such good friends this last week. When do you mean to go?"

"I think it had better be to-morrow," he said, with an effort.

"As soon as that? Oh, I *am* sorry. What can put you into such a hurry suddenly?" There was genuine disappointment in her voice, but before he could speak again she was off on another tack.

"Look—there is my island over there! You can't imagine what lovely seaweeds there are to be found there, as well as shrimps."

In another few minutes already Jessie was making fast her boat to a sharp point of rock.

"I am always very careful about that now," she explained, "since it gave me a lesson by running away on one such occasion. I had come for seaweeds that time, and if an unknown man hadn't

been dropped from heaven I might be sitting here still."

"And who was the unknown man?"

"I forget his name. Somebody staying at the Towers."

"Was that long ago?" asked Sir Augustus, a little anxiously.

"Oh yes; two years almost, and I haven't seen him since, nor wished to, either. He wasn't at all amusing."

Sir Augustus looked relieved, and took up his basket almost with alacrity.

But the baskets were only half full when Jessie stood still and looked towards the western sky.

"I am not sure whether we had not better be content with this. The wind is rising faster than I thought it would."

"I leave the decision to you," said Sir Augustus, resignedly.

His boots were marked with the slime of the seaweed covered rocks on which he had been slipping about for twenty minutes, his convalescent ankle ached badly, and his long white fingers showed signs of the pinches he had received from various crabs he had tried to grip—of course always at the wrong place—but not for worlds would he have hurried the departure from what to him was a cruelly sweet paradise.

"Yes, I think we must go," said Jessie, decisively.

Her hat had slipped from its place and hung half down her back by its ribbon, while her hair, just bursting from its fastenings, made a quivering golden cloud about her head, and the rising gale

strained her skirt about her knees and displayed the slender ankles beneath. In her belt she had stuck a bunch of Michaelmas daisies which she had found growing on the grassy crown of the tiny island, and which now beat against her very heart, fast and tumultuously, as though knocking for admittance.

The boat was plunging badly already by the time they got back to it.

"Will you not let me take an oar?" asked Sir Augustus anxiously. "It will be too much for you alone."

"Can you row?" she asked incredulously.

"I—I am afraid I can't, but perhaps I can try."

"No, thank you; I can manage quite well alone. All you have to think of is keeping your balance, and please don't get wetter than you can help, or Papa will scold me. There! that is our first wave, and if I know our coast it won't be our last."

She looked at him curiously as the boat danced out on to the open water, knowing well that to an unaccustomed eye the thing looked much more dangerous than it really was. Somehow she had not expected great things of his personal valour. It was quite an agreeable surprise to see that his somewhat prim courtesy of manner remained untouched by either wind or salt water, and that, judging from the unusual brilliancy of his one eye, whatever he was undergoing was certainly not physical fear.

"You must have rowed since you were a child," he presently remarked, apparently as the result of his reflections.

"Yes, all my life. I have grown up on salt

water, you know. Is there no sea near your home?"

"None at all; it is quite an inland place."

"I can't imagine what an inland place is like, in fact I can't imagine what any place is like except St. Mallan's, and as for England, it's as strange to me as America. I've never even been over the border, you know," and she sighed regretfully, even as she tugged at her oars—"Nor am I ever likely to go."

"And you would like to?" he asked, with sudden eagerness.

"Of course I would! I have a positive hunger for seeing the world. There! that's our second shower-bath! But we'll get home in time, all the same." And she laughed and shook back her wet hair on which the salt drops were standing in great, greenish glass beads.

Sir Augustus' right hand closed more convulsively over the edge of the boat, but it was not of keeping his balance that he was thinking then, just as little as he heeded the spray which was vainly attempting to blur his dazzled gaze.

"And if I were to show it you?" he blurted out, having opened his lips twice to speak, and twice again sharply contracted them.

"You? What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean—I mean"—he stammered helplessly, scarlet up to his scanty hair roots. "It was only that I meant to ask you—Miss Drummond, do you think you could make up your mind to marry me?"

Jessie's astonishment was so great that she came near to upsetting the boat by a false movement of the oars.

“Marry you?” she repeated, opening her blue-green eyes to their widest, and positively dropping her under-lip in the consternation of the moment. “Good gracious, no! I could never think of such a thing!”

CHAPTER III.

“WHAT made me do that?”

In the sleepless hours of the night that followed upon the eventful day, Sir Augustus was asking himself this question. It seemed to himself incredible that he should have been so mad. On the very night that had preceded this one he had paced the tannery exactly as he was doing now, and fighting another battle with himself, and the result of the battle had been the resolve to quit the place at once and without giving a sign, since of course there could be no hope for him—and on the very top of this resolve he had gone and made a proposal of marriage—and a fool of himself into the bargain!

“What made me do that?”

Alas, he knew quite well what had made him do it. It was the golden-brown hair, and the blue-green eyes, and the dazzling, shifting colour, which he could not look upon and keep his senses.

From the very moment that she had stood rigid against the background of sunset light, her youthful figure, down to the waist, cut sharply against the amber of the western sky and her hair shining like a glory about her head, she had taken possession of his imagination. He could not see her face, but the very uncertainty on this point served to keep his fancy at work upon her. In the ten

days that followed he had fitted her in his mind with a dozen different faces, but with none that seemed to him as bewitching as the one which he found bending over him on recovering from his fainting fit. From that moment his own fate was sealed, though the idea of coming forward as a suitor was instantly rejected as unfeasible.

By nature a pessimist of the most pronounced type, Sir Augustus had, ever since childhood, been a prey to over much doubt and self-interrogation. A painfully vivid consciousness of his own want of attractiveness had inclined an intrinsically honest and upright, though mentally limited, nature to a state of constant suspicion. The thought that he was being made fun of seldom left him, and never ceased to torture, for—paradoxically enough—the vanity of this diffident man was furiously sensitive. That all this inward dissatisfied reflection should incline to bitterness was almost unavoidable. Debarred by his shyness from airing his grievances, he had no resource but to brood over them, and by dint of doing so had become morbid. What his reflections and constant re-examining of the case had told him now was that a beautiful and robust girl could not possibly love a sickly, one-eyed wretch such as he was. Again and again he proved to his own satisfaction that to risk a refusal by declaring his love would be mere folly; and now on some insane impulse he had run the risk, and the worst had happened. Probably he could not have done it, had not the excitement of the rising storm helped to stimulate his nerves and overshadow his timidity. As he paced the groaning tannery, round whose wooden walls the gale now

swept in all its force, it was his vanity that smarted almost more sorely than his feelings. At the recollection of the look of indignant astonishment on the beautiful face opposite him, he struck his forehead with his clenched hand and cursed himself for his folly. At that moment he came very near to hating the cause of the so stinging mortification just undergone. What could have made him do this thing? It was to this question that he ceaselessly returned.

There was no solace now to his wounded feeling but to leave the place immediately, and never again to see her face or hear her name. He would speak to Dr. Drummond as soon as daylight was come.

And at this very same hour Jessie, sitting before her looking-glass, was putting to herself a question of very much the same sort.

"I wonder now why I did that?" she queried, with her elbows on the toilet table, her chin in her hands, and her hair tumbling over her shoulders, staring at herself fixedly in the glass the while.

The first consternation over, cool reflection had showed her Sir Augustus' offer in quite a new light. Why, after all, had she been so indignant? The man was not old, and though he certainly was not good-looking, he was undoubtedly a gentleman, and she could not suppose that everybody got good-looking husbands, more especially in such a place as St. Mallan's. Even his one eye, now that she came to look at the matter closely, did not necessarily exclude him from the rank of possible husbands. Jessie could even remember having heard of a girl who had married a one-armed man,

so to marry a one-eyed one was presumably quite as possible. He had both position and money—was not this the very opportunity she had been sighing after for so long, perhaps her one single chance of getting away into the big world which she longed to see, and of regaining that higher social level, to whose loss she had never been able to submit. In default of both father and brother, perhaps it was reserved to her to rescue the family name from oblivion. As Lady Alington how much she would be able to do for Jem, what endless opportunities there would be for pushing her father in his career, either with or without his will!

Her eyes began to shine at their reflection in the glass. After all, Sir Augustus' proposal was not so insulting as it had in the first moment appeared. Decidedly, in this new light the idea was worth considering. It was true that she did not love him, but what could that matter, since she did not believe in love? By dint of being sorry for him she had got distinctly to like him, and she felt quite certain that she respected him, surely that ought to be enough—she had always told herself that that would be enough. Besides he evidently did love her, probably had loved her from the first, as the many symptoms to which she had now got the clue retrospectively convinced her. Seeing her disbelief in the sentiment the latter reflection was scarcely quite logical, but it was indulged in, all the same.

Next morning, when Sir Augustus, having made up all his parcels, came downstairs, pale and heavy-eyed, with the object of asking Dr. Drummond to arrange for his immediate departure, he

was more disagreeably than agreeably surprised to find the doctor's daughter sitting on a coil of rope in the lower room, and evidently waiting for somebody. He would have passed with a stiffly awkward bow, but at sight of him Jessie sprang to her feet and came forward to meet him with a particularly bright and unembarrassed smile upon her lips.

"Why have you got your umbrella in your hand, and what are you carrying that bag for?" she asked, a little puzzled, as she took in the significant points of his appearance.

"I am leaving St. Mallan's in an hour's time," he frigidly replied. "An hour at latest. I am just going to ask Dr. Drummond to see about a cab."

"Oh, nonsense!" broke in Jessie, cheerfully. "You don't mean to say that you have taken it to heart as much as all that? But you won't require a cab, and you won't require that bag either. I was just coming to tell you that I have changed my mind about what I said to you yesterday."

Sir Augustus looked at her as coldly as he could, not yet comprehending.

"Yes," chattered on Jessie. "I have been thinking over it, and I see that I was too hasty in saying No—it was because you took me so by surprise; and so I waited for you here in order to tell you that I mean to marry you, after all."

The poor man shuddered suddenly from head to foot. Though she might not know what she was saying, he knew it, and the thought of all that those few lightly spoken words implied terrified him strangely. That was the first impulse. What the second moved him to do was to draw up his narrow figure and politely refuse the belated boon. For

just one instant the opportunity of avenging his mangled vanity seemed to be irresistible, but before he had been able to unlock his trembling lips in order to pronounce the scathing words that were to crush her, she had begun to speak again, serenely unconscious of the struggle within him, and never for a moment doubting that she was conferring an unquestionable favour. She had come to her own resolution without over-much hesitation or self-questionings—being ever rapid in her decisions and prone to consider anything once resolved upon as inevitable.

“You see it is this way. I should like you to know exactly how matters stand. I am not pretending to be in love with you, mind; but that needn’t make you uneasy, because I don’t believe in what they call love—not very much at least. I shall, of course—I am sure I shall be quite as good and faithful a wife to you without that imaginary sentiment as I could be with it. You understand me, do you not?”

“Yes, I understand you.”

There was still a remnant of artificial coldness even in the hoarseness of his tone, but the dull eye fixed on her was beginning to burn. In the agony of the moment he ground his teeth impotently. He was dying to humiliate this woman, and dying to seize her in his arms—yearning to spurn her and yearning to possess her. At sight of her unclouded confidence he could have spat in her face, and at sight of the green reflection in her eyes he could have knelt down and adored her.

“I understand you,” he said, groaning as he spoke.

"Well, and what are you going to say? I suppose *you* believe in love?"

"I suppose so," he repeated, mechanically. The intoxication was gaining on him. Just now he was not conscious enough of her exact words to be taken aback by her frankness: it was only later on that they came back to him in their whole significance.

"Very well, then, let's make a compact. You can be in love with me as much as you like, and I promise only to like you and to be a good wife. There, will that do?"

He stood rigid for one moment longer, fighting the last battle, his face working painfully, then quite unexpectedly he almost sprang forward, and taking hold of her two hands, dragged them up to his face.

"It will do! It will do!" he murmured, breathlessly, covering her fingers with trembling kisses. "You can do with me what you like."

And in this way it was that Sir Augustus Alington and Jessie Drummond came to unite their lots.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

A WARM, moist August day, closely covered by a heavy grey sky, a day on which the world seems to be undergoing a universal steam-bath—when great beads of damp stand on every leaf, and even stone balustrades seem to be perspiring—a far more enervating heat than that of the hottest sun that ever shone.

Lady Alington, on her return from a walk in the vast, green park in the midst of which stood her new home, had found that the hair on her forehead was out of curl, but had not felt the energy either to heat an iron or to call her maid—so heavily did the atmosphere weigh upon her—and had contented herself with falling straight into an easy-chair and taking up the nearest book. Very soon, however, it slipped from her hands, while her head dropped back against the cushion. In another minute she was sound asleep, with lips falling softly apart, her white summer gown forming almost the only light spot in the large and sombrely-furnished room.

She was still asleep when half an hour later the door opened, and Sir Augustus, looking about him half apologetically, as was his habit even in his own

house, advanced into the room. Before he had gone two steps his eye had been caught by the white dress, and immediately his face lit up, at the same time that his pace relaxed. It was on tiptoe that he drew near, until within a yard of her, then, standing quite still, and holding his breath, he devoured the picture before him.

A woman asleep is not always necessarily seen to the greatest advantage, since there is always the danger of too much flushing or of an ungraceful attitude—let alone the supreme danger of snoring—but supposing all these perils are successfully avoided, and light and position are favourable, it remains true that a sleeping woman is generally more seductive than a waking one. Within the past months Sir Augustus had seen his wife in court dress as well as in innumerable costly toilettes, and had passionately admired her each time, but as he now stood still, breathless, before the easy-chair, it occurred to him that he had never seen her look so beautiful as this. With her hair making a golden-brown haze against the dark red cushion and her milk-white throat enticingly displayed, with the listless hands in her lap and the loose curves of the luxuriously relaxed limbs, she was indeed calculated to upset a stronger equanimity than his. The thought that all this wealth of youthful beauty was his own—legally his possession—mounted to his head like the fumes of some strong wine, making him giddy for the moment, and bold, far beyond his habit. He drew a little nearer yet, and, somewhat to his own astonishment, bent quickly and kissed her on her hot cheek.

Instantly she moved and sleepily opened her

eyes. There was a troubled look gleaming right through the clouds of departing sleep.

"Is that you, Augustus?" she asked, drowsily. "Have you been here long? Did you not wake me?"

"I have only come in this minute, but—I did wake you—although I am sorry now that I did so," he added, as an afterthought.

"Why?"

"Because you looked so entrancing with your head so far back against the cushion. I don't mean to say that you look less beautiful now, but only——"

"Never mind the rest," she interrupted, with a turn of her head which looked like impatience. "But tell me how you woke me. I don't think you spoke, did you? I seemed to feel something."

She looked at him with what seemed anxiety in the depths of her eyes.

"I woke you like this," said Sir Augustus, with an effort at playfulness, and, still under the influence of that unusual exhilaration, he stooped again and kissed her—this time on the lips.

She shrank back a little as he stooped, but made no resistance, only, having stared straight before her for a moment in silence, she suddenly burst into tears.

Immediately the assumed boldness fell to the ground. If Sir Augustus, flurried and scarlet, did not throw himself straight at his wife's feet, it was only because he lacked the courage. As it was he stood helplessly before her, gently wringing his hands, and feeling vaguely guilty. "What is it? What have I done?" he hur-

riedly inquired. "Jessie, my darling, why are you crying? Is there anything wrong?"

She could not answer immediately, shaken as she was by the tears which had come quite as much as a surprise to herself as to him—but she dumbly shook her head.

"Tell me what it is!" he pleaded.

Already she was drying her tears, ashamed of this childish display of emotion.

"I can't tell you what it is, Augustus, because I don't know myself," and she smiled up at him deprecatingly, aware that she owed him amends.

"You don't know yourself? How can that be?"

His first alarm over, a certain shade of stiffness had come into his manner, while his one eye watch her with a new keenness.

"You are not crying surely because I—I kissed you?"

"Of course not—you have done that before, have you not?"

There was a suspicion of bitterness in the laugh that went with the words. "It was being awakened so suddenly, I suppose, or perhaps it was the heat that upset me. Let us put it down to nerves, Augustus. It's the proper thing to have nerves, you know; and in order to nurse mine up properly I think I'll just lie down for a bit before dinner."

And, with a parting glance and a somewhat uncertain smile on her lips, Jessie slowly left the room.

Arrived in her own apartment she did not, however, lie down, but going to the window, threw it wide, and, with her arms folded on the sill stared out at the crowns of the grand elms and down at

the surface of the big, sleepy pool whose stagnant waters, like a blind looking-glass, lay dull and unreflecting at their feet.

The tears were dried on her cheeks, but the eyes, even now, in repose, showed signs of deep dissatisfaction, the same dissatisfaction which had given them their especial character in the old St. Mallan's days. The trees they looked out upon were magnificent, the turf a dream of perfection, the avenue as well cared for as any in England, yet Lady Alington's eyes looked upon them as discontentedly as those of Jessie Drummond had ever gazed on the bare rocks of her sea-bound home.

Her marriage, then, had not been a success?

She scarcely herself knew how to answer that question; just as little as she had been able to say why she had just been crying. According to every rule she knew of, it ought to have been a success, and, but for a discovery which she had been gradually making, it probably would have been so. This discovery was that merely to respect one's husband is not enough, after all; that it needs something different altogether to lift a sensitive woman over the harshnesses of married life. More than once during the past eight months she had wondered what that something could be, and to-day the wonder returned on her with an intenser, more passionate curiosity. Could it possibly be that thing called love, which she had elected to regard as a poet's dream? She could not say—she knew only that there was a necessity here which nothing she knew of could meet. If esteem alone were enough, why then should she feel humiliated in her own eyes every time her husband kissed her?

Just at first, indeed, the excitement of her new life had kept her from coming entirely to her senses, though even in those early days of fresh delights and unsuspected experiences the inner feeling of humiliation never entirely left her, running like a black thread through all the glittering tissue of her present existence. She had ascribed to herself an enormous appetite for worldly enjoyment, but to her astonishment a few months sufficed to still it to a wonderful extent, perhaps because of the very vehemence with which she had attacked the new dish. Neither had her natural shrewdness, her true Scotch "canniness" been duped for long by the brilliant outside of this life. Very soon she had come to understand that this big world was really only a conglomeration of worlds as intrinsically tiny as the one she had lived in hitherto, with as many individual dulnesses, as many mean motives. It called itself London, but it was as despicable in its own way and as petty as any provincial society—only that it stood on a different level, and made more noise and glittered more. It was amusing enough, of its kind, no doubt, but very soon she began to think that the price she had paid for this amusement was too high. After all, this was not what she had wanted. In proportion as the feeling of pleasure faded, the inner voice grew louder, until at last she began to guess at what she had done and to hate herself for it.

It was months past now that the real respect she felt for her husband had begun to be coloured by impatience. He possessed estimable qualities, no doubt, but also the unpardonable fault of boring her. The marks of a devotion which she felt so

hopelessly unable to return, had early begun to irritate, in proportion as the sense of pity which had first inclined her to him faded. There seemed no more object in pitying him now, since he had got what he wanted. By this time his timidities had become as distasteful to her as his rare audacities, while, mingled with it all, was the resentment of a spirit to whom submission is bitter, the natural rebellion of a robust creature who knows itself to belong to a weaker one.

It was in the *tête-à-tête* of Allwood, following on the London season, that these latter sensations had taken an acuter form. The place itself was calculated to bore, almost as much as its owner. The huge house, standing in the large park and surrounded by a flat and featureless country, had nothing which appealed to Jessie's imaginative mood. Everything seemed to her on too large a scale for comfort; not only the rooms, but the very doors and windows appeared to have been calculated for a race of giants, making ordinary folk feel dwarfish by comparison. The staircases were too wide, the furniture too massive, the walks in the park too broad—she seemed to herself lost in the midst of these many straight lines. It was only now that she discovered how beautiful had been the seaweed-grown rocks at St. Mallan's, and though she had not yet arrived at acknowledging that she actually regretted her old obscure life, she was already beginning to feel momentary yearnings for the smell of salt water and the sight of heather hills. Even the mist wreaths that on moist mornings hung about the stagnant water of the pool, and stole in from the marshy meadows to cling about the trees

of the park, could not fail to have a depressing effect upon her sea-bred nerves.

As a child it had been a joke against her that she never played with a toy longer than for a day; perhaps it was nothing but this innate love of variety which had caused her to tire of London so fast, just as she had formerly tired of St. Mallan's—and of Allwood faster than of both, or perhaps, too, it was that that which alone could satisfy her ardent and restless spirit had not yet come into her life.

CHAPTER II.

THE lights of Leith harbour were burning dim and blurred through a peculiarly dismal November dusk, while an orthodox east wind whistled in the rigging above and drove the falling sleet across the breadth of the deck. It was as inhospitable a welcome as Old Scotland has ever prepared for a returning son, yet on at least one of the passengers of the Prince Albert it seemed to have missed its depressing effect.

His arms on the parapet of the slowly advancing steamer and his body bent forward with an eagerness which even the immobility of the attitude could not conceal, he silently devoured with his eyes those dully burning lights, as though they had been the stars of heaven, or the beacons of some long-deferred hope. Around him there was the usual bustle and shouting, without which no long voyage can end—passengers looking wildly for their packages and for each other, filling up their leisure moments by either cursing the weather or lamenting over it, according to their sex and temperament; but the man with his arms on the parapet never moved and never even turned his head, for him there was evidently neither sleet nor wind, there was nothing but these lights ahead.

Presently some one came and stood beside him.

"Is that you, Mr. Ellis?" asked a cheerily youthful voice. "I'd better say goodbye to you here, I fancy. Once we get mixed up in the crowd there's not much chance of meeting again."

"Then you think we shall get in to-night?" asked the other, turning his head for the first time.

"The captain says so, anyway, and I've promised to punch his head if he's wrong. Twelve hours lost is no joke, for a man in my position, I can tell you." And the speaker indulged in a peal of harmlessly complacent hilarity. "My young woman will be counting the minutes by this time, I'll be bound."

The passenger addressed as Mr. Ellis had resumed his contemplation of the lights. During the five weeks' voyage that was just ending he had heard a good deal of the prospective happiness of this gushing youth, and had listened patiently to hour-long raptures on the charms of the bride-elect, but for some reason or other he felt that he could stand no more of that just now.

"You can't imagine what it makes a fellow feel like," was now being said confidentially beside him; "to know that within a week he'll be married to *her*. Coming home must be good at all times, no doubt, but it isn't a patch upon coming home to be married."

"Why can't I imagine what it feels like?" retorted Mr. Ellis, turning with a new vivacity upon the speaker. "Will you believe that I can, when I tell you that I am in the same case as yourself?"

"You don't mean to say so! Going to be married? The same as myself?"

"Why not? You haven't got the monopoly of matrimony, have you?"

"And within the week, too?" asked the other, in undiminished astonishment at so startling a piece of information coming from so uncommunicative a person as this particular fellow-passenger had proved himself to be.

"No, not exactly within the week," and the speaker smiled in spite of himself. "But I certainly hope within the year."

"And to——?"

"To *her*," replied Mr. Ellis, emphatically; "just the same as yourself."

"I see: but what made you keep it so close? We might have had all the voyage to talk it out in and to exchange impressions."

"I am not very good at talking, and besides there are some points not yet quite settled, so you would oblige me by not mentioning the matter at present."

"Of course not; anything you like. By Jove! what's that on my sleeve? I declare it's turning to snow!"

"So it is!" And the two returned Australians were silent, looking down with a curious feeling of something regained at the first snowflakes they had seen for many a long day.

When, an hour later, the Prince Albert lay alongside of the pier the single flakes had thickened to a dense shower, but the wild night that was setting in appeared to Mr. Ellis no adequate reason for delay, even though, besides the railway journey, he had a long drive over the unsheltered uplands before him.

It was close upon midnight when, with a shovel-ful of snow on his travelling hat and a beard as white as though he had been seventy instead of twenty-four, he alighted at the door of the bare, wind-blown, little Manse in whose stony face there gleamed two fiery eyes, the two windows of the lighted parlour in which father and sisters were listening with beating hearts for the sound of carriage wheels.

The welcome was more marked by silences than by words—the shy silences of the two freckle-faced, sandy-haired, but nevertheless pleasant looking lassies, who seemed to themselves to be welcoming a stranger, seeing that they had scarcely been well out of the nursery when their big brother had so suddenly sailed away out of their ken, and the anxiously questioning silence of the white-haired father who had never been able quite to understand why he had been robbed of his son three years ago, nor whether he was going to regain him now or no.

“Is that you, my boy?” was all the old man said; and all the son answered was, “It is I, Father,” while he almost regretfully brushed from his sleeve the precious snowflakes which were telling him so plainly that he really was at home. Without the subtle tremor in the voice, that question would have been nothing, but to the young man the slight unsteadiness told all that he required to know. Besides it wanted but a few minutes to break through the crust of shyness which sat upon the little sisters so quaintly, yet so well. In less than five minutes, indeed, after having sat still in a corner, sharing a chair shoulder to shoulder, and

well out of the circle of the lamplight, they began to use their tongues, instead of only their eyes, and the use they put them to was personal remarks.

"The idea of his growing a beard!" tittered Meg, just loud enough to be heard. "I wouldn't have known him a bit if I had met him—would you, Jean?"

"I'd have taken him for a bushman," said Jean, with decision. "Brother David," she ventured out loud, "are you going to keep that beard always?"

"I'll cut it off to-morrow morning, if it frightens you, bairns. Does it really make me look like a bushman?" he asked, with almost a shade of anxiety in his voice.

"But not like an ugly bushman," Meg hastened to say.

"No, not like an ugly one," repeated the father, with his eyes lingering lovingly upon the well-knit figure which had been so boyish but three years ago and was now so distinctly that of a man. Although not above middle height and anything but classical in feature, David Ellis was, wherever he showed himself, immediately and favourably noticed. The breadth of shoulders, almost too great in proportion to the height, might have been found fault with by an artist, but gave a reassuring impression not only of exceptional strength, but also of elasticity and vibrating life. The face, so far as the dense beard revealed it, with the brown hair tumbling about a wide forehead, was likewise too broad to be regularly handsome, but was redeemed from the commonplace by something earnest and peculiar in the dark-brown eyes, and at moments rendered almost beautiful by an instantaneous

lighting up of the pupils, as though from the reflection of some inner fire—something that made it impossible to confound him with other young men of his age. Those eyes were evidently capable of enthusiasm—perhaps even of a little folly—although the rest of his features might almost have been called stolid, and although his manner was quiet to the point of sedateness. The whole man was intensely individual, in contra-distinction to those people of both sexes who appear to be made not in single specimens but in batches. You might like him or not, but to meet him was to feel that you were discovering a new man, and not the more or less close replica of some previously known fellow-creature.

It was not till Meg and Jean, dazed with the sleep which even David's Australian stories could no longer keep at bay, had left the supper table and gone upstairs, that Mr. Ellis had a chance of satisfying the very keenest edge of paternal curiosity.

"You have come home to stay for a good bit, surely?" he asked, a little diffidently.

Mr. Ellis, the elder, was a small, round-faced old gentleman, whom Nature had evidently intended to be both dapper and plump, but whom circumstances had kept from becoming either. He gazed wistfully at his son across the table, as he put his question.

"That depends," said David, smiling to himself under his beard, with a curious look of happiness in his eyes.

"On what?"

"On some plans I have got."

The old man moved restlessly in his chair, and

cleared his throat as though to press the question—but all he said was: “Your farm seems to be prospering greatly?”

“Greatly, thank God. It’s true that I have sweated like a slave, but what’s that the moment you succeed? Every prize you gain blots out a hundred hardships from your very memory. I tell you, Father, I’ll make you comfortable yet in your old days, aye, and the lassies too, in case they get no husbands.” And he laughed with a gaiety which did the father’s heart good.

“Then you are glad you went out?”

“More thankful than I can say. If I had not gone out I should never have reached—what I hope to reach.”

Mr. Ellis made another uncertain movement. It was evident that he was devoured by curiosity, but what was the good of asking a question, since he knew that it would not be answered.

“There are lots of old friends waiting to see you,” he remarked after a moment. “M’Nab was saying he would be over on Saturday.”

“I’m not sure that I shall be at home by Saturday. I have to make a run to St. Mallan’s this week.”

Mr. Ellis’s pale grey eyes grew suddenly brighter.

“To the Towers?” he asked, quickly.

“No, not to the Towers. It is at St. Mallan’s itself that I have business.”

“But surely you will call on your aunt?”

“Some day, of course; but not this time.”

He was again smiling to himself, like some one who has a happy secret and is revelling in it.

Mr. Ellis could not quite suppress a sigh, but it did not come from the depth of his heart. Whatever the boy was after it was clear that he was happy. His unusual talkativeness during supper, and the very ring of his voice were proofs enough to one who had known him from his grave and self-contained boyhood, and with that the father must perforce be content. In every point of appearance and expression he looked like a man who knows exactly what he wants and means to have it too.

There followed a couple of peacefully blissful days spent between the cosy parlour of the Manse and the grim little garden at the back, between whose loose stone walls nothing but gooseberry bushes seemed to feel at home, and where snow-balls now flew about freely between Brother David and the little sisters. Certainly the boy had changed a good deal in Australia, the father reflected, as he watched the sport. Then, having sufficiently saturated himself with the feeling of home, a new restlessness seemed to be growing upon him, until he announced one morning that he was going away for a couple of days.

The temperature had changed within the last twelve hours, and the premature snow was just turning to slush as he alighted at the St. Mallan's station. At the first glance David saw the carriage from Craigie Towers waiting for some visitor, and at sight of the liveried coachman instinctively drew back. No doubt a bed at the castle would be more comfortable than one at the St. Mallan's inn, and he had no serious doubts either of a welcome being accorded him, but he had reasons which

made him feel that it would be a baseness to claim it to-day.

By the time he found himself installed at the "Twa Creels" it was growing dark, and the joyful impatience which had borne him up all day had perforce to put a curb upon itself, since it was impossible to take any further steps to-night. Alone in the inn bedroom, and with a single candle burning on the table, he seemed to be assailed by the first misgivings that had come over him to-day. With the light in his hand he now approached the dim mirror on the wall, and anxiously scrutinised his own face by the flickering rays. The dark-brown beard was gone now, revealing a well-moulded, though somewhat large mouth, a mouth whose almost stubbornly determined expression accorded strangely with the boyish enthusiasm of the eyes.

"Do I still look like a bushman, I wonder?" he murmured, with an apprehension that was almost comical in its gravity. "I wonder if she has the same tastes as Meg and Jean? Supposing she finds me a fright!"

He looked at himself disapprovingly, then thoughtfully began to pace the room, the confidence coming back to his face and the light to his eyes as the minutes passed. Then there followed an hour's wandering about the now dark town, sundry scrutinisings of house-fronts, and retracings of steps, until at last in an empty bye-street he stood before a low-fronted little cottage which seemed to him familiar, and behind which the monotonous wash of the tide could be plainly heard. The stars had come out now, and the unusual mildness of the

air, as well as the soft mud underfoot, could almost have deceived a man into believing that it was spring that was coming instead of winter.

David lingered long in that bye-street, scanning the few lighted windows, and occasionally lending an ear, as though greedy of every sound that came from behind those white walls. Only when night had fallen entirely did he slowly retrace his steps to the inn. Here there was a lighted room full of an almost gay company that consisted partly of the sailors that by daytime decorated the castle terrace, and partly of such tradesmen as were strong-minded enough to brave their wives' displeasure—and all discussing the day's events over their glasses of toddy—quite an exciting prospect for a stranger who had been reduced to his own company for the last twelve hours. But David only cast a glance in, and then proceeded to ask whether there was no place where he could sup alone. Somehow the present occasion seemed to him too solemn to be spent among noisy drinkers, and he had no fear of his own thoughts running dry to-night.

While he was consuming his cold beef in a back room, the landlord, either taking pity on his solitude or else with the object of airing his private curiosity, sauntered in in a casual manner.

"I don't seem to have seen ye in these parts before," he began, with a sort of respectful familiarity. "If I could make so free as to guess I should say ye were a stranger in oor toon."

"I have been here once or twice before," replied David guardedly, but not forbiddingly, for the questioner was a large, fatherly sort of man with an iron-grey mane as shaggy as that of a Shetland

pony, and a pair of kindly yet keen blue eyes, peering out from under densely matted eyebrows.

"Do you say so? And may that have been long since?"

"Three years since my last visit—three and a half years," he conscientiously corrected.

"That's not an awfu' time precisely, no doot ye ken yeir way aboot the place yet?"

"More or less. By the way, Dr. Drummond still lives in the same house he occupied then, does he not?"

"Ah, so it's to consult the doctor you've come here, I'm thinking. Yes, he's in the old Tannery house, the same as ever. But I should never have taken ye for ailing, to look at ye."

"At what hour is he to be found at home?" asked the traveller, ignoring the personal remark.

"Up to ten in the morning, but he has his afternoon hours as well. A kindly man, the doctor, but grown a deal quieter since his daughter left him."

"His daughter? But I thought he had only one?"

"Just one—that's it, and as bonnie a lassie as was ever seen in oor streets. Ye may believe it or no, but the luck that came to the doctor's house was welcome as a holiday to St. Mallan's."

"What is this luck you are speaking of?" asked David, laying down his knife and fork, and looking straight at the landlord.

"Why, the marriage, to be sure! And a right big marriage, too; for, though the lass was bonnie, who could have taken it to be likely that she'd be called 'My Lady' some day?"

"Then you mean that she is married?" asked the young man, after a rather long pause, and speaking a little slower than before.

"Grandly married. Lady Alington is what they call her now: and a splendid estate in some of those English counties, and a house in Lunnun as well, if I mind right."

"Are you quite sure of what you are saying?" asked David, almost sternly.

"Sure? The Lord bless you! Why, it was to this very house that they brought Sir Augustus the day he fell from that daft wheel-thing, and it was from here that the doctor fetched him home, the better to look after him. That was the fashion after which it came about, I'm thinking. 'Twas more than four weeks that he was laid up in the old Tannery, and with the girl helping to nurse him and all—though, for my own pairt, I didn't look upon the baronet as just cut out for catching a young person's fancy. The marriage was a bit of a surprise to us all, and a real reward for the doctor's charity, for he didn't know the name then, and many's the beggar he's taken in just that way, straight off the road."

"When did this happen?"

While the landlord was speaking David had resumed his knife and fork, perhaps with the object of bending his eyes on his plate. His sun-browned skin seemed to have lost a little of its glow, and the fork was travelling at random round the plate, but otherwise there was nothing remarkable about the man, nothing to show that a hope of three years' standing had received its death-blow.

"'Twill be a year next month, and if ye doubt

my information," added the landlord, a trifle nettled, "ye've only got to look up the church register, since they were married in St. Mallan's kirk."

"That's what I shall do," said David, more to himself than to his interlocutor.

And that was what he actually did the first thing next morning, having come down from his room at a fabulously early hour. It was not until he had deliberately turned over the pages of the parish register and read out aloud to himself the entry which recorded the union of Sir Augustus Alington, Bart., to Jessie Drummond, duly attested and witnessed, as having taken place on this spot on a certain day of December of the year 188—, that some obstinate incredulity within him appeared to be, if not satisfied, yet convinced.

"A year, a whole year!" it rung in his head, as he retraced his steps.

A little while later the shaggy-haired landlord was disagreeably surprised to meet his guest on the staircase with his portmanteau ready strapped in his hand.

"Ye mean that ye're off already?" he asked, in professional alarm. "Ye can't have seen the doctor, surely?"

"I don't require to see the doctor."

"But I thought ye were saying——"

"I said nothing of the sort," the other sharply interrupted. "What I require is a cab to the station."

The landlord looked into his guest's face and saw that it had changed both its colour and its expression since last night, and he remembered now that the person who slept below the best bedroom

had complained of being kept awake by a continual treading of the floor overhead.

"If he said he was ailing to-day I'd have made shift to believe him," was the landlord's reflection when, a few minutes later, his shrewd blue eyes were watching the departing fly. "Can it be, after all, that it was not the doctor, but the doctor's daughter he was wantin' to consult, and can it be that it's his heart that's sick and no' his body? Sic a change in a man overnight! It's well-nigh past my comprehension!"

CHAPTER III.

THE landlord of the "Twa Creels" was not far wrong in his surmises.

David Ellis had seen Jessie Drummond only once in his life, on the day when he found her stranded on the rocky island where she was gathering seaweeds, and taken her home in his boat—but that single meeting and the few hours passed in her society had been enough to shape all his future.

He had then been standing at a turning-point in his life. The only son of a country minister, David had, since boyhood, had a leaning towards the army, and neither were there any great difficulties in the way, since his aunt, who had made a big match by marrying Mr. M'Farrel of Craigie Towers, had early declared her readiness to smooth the path of her brother's son in the desired direction. She had not added that this readiness stood in connection with a long-cherished wish of her heart, but both David and his father knew exactly how matters stood. Mrs. M'Farrel had always remained at heart more an Ellis than a M'Farrel, and the idea of how well the M'Farrel money would mate with the Ellis name had begun to occupy her while the fair-haired Monica was still in the nursery. She loved her brother more than she loved her husband,

and she knew the privations he lived under too well from personal experience to undervalue them. To see him end his days in comfort, relieved of all anxiety regarding his daughters' future, and by the same process to provide Monica with a good husband—for she had always believed in her nephew—this seemed to her an object well worth plotting and planning for. But for long there appeared little chance of her vision being realised, for Mr. M'Farrel, who was old-fashioned in his ideas, and somewhat of a fool, was by no means proud of his wife's connections, and did all he could to discourage the intercourse between the two houses. In this way it happened that when David, at twenty-one, was invited to spend a fortnight at the Towers, he knew very little of his cousin. It was in order to supply this want that the visit had obviously been planned, for Mr. M'Farrel had died only a few months before, and the field was now clear, so to say, for Mrs. M'Farrel's operations. No distinct word had been spoken, but between brother and sister it was tacitly understood that this was to be a species of experimental fortnight, an opportunity given to the young people to get to know each other, and to decide whether they liked each other as grown-up people as much as they had appeared to on the occasion of their rare meetings as children. David went to the Towers with his eyes fully opened to all these facts, and in a fairly acquiescent frame of mind. He felt no particular elation at the thought of becoming rich in this almost ignominiously easy way, but he liked what he had seen of the girl, and he had not yet really discovered himself in any direction, and saw no reason

for not making his father happy by acquiescing in his pet wish.

During the critical fortnight he continued to like Monica, but did not begin to feel towards the woman anything beyond what he had felt towards the child. He was indeed aware of a certain admiration for her smooth, pale-yellow hair, her clear reposeful blue eyes, and the graceful lines of her youthful figure which, in the deep black of her mourning robes, looked slender almost to breakableness—but it was a distinctly cousinly admiration. She pleased him and soothed him, but utterly failed to move him, as he understood that men were wont to be moved by the woman of their choice. Yet in all this he saw no reason for resisting what appeared to be his fate—the less so that he very soon began to perceive that, besides making his father and his aunt happy, he would be making Monica happy too, for that her feelings were more than cousinly the inexperienced and transparently candid girl had very early betrayed.

Thus he reached the end of the fortnight, almost content to do as he was expected to do, and with apparently the whole plan of his future life neatly mapped out for him, and on the very day before his departure—being quite resolved to propose for his cousin's hand next morning—he took a row in the bay which completely upset both present and future.

The first sight of Jessie Drummond's short-frocked, dishevelled figure, standing prominent on a piece of rock, and making signals of mock distress, had stamped itself upon his brain with all the force of the one or two real impressions which is

all we receive in the course of a lifetime. He had not got near enough to distinguish her features plainly when already he felt troubled in a way which whole hours spent in Monica's society had not been able to achieve. When he had looked into her eyes, and heard the ring of her voice, and taken in all the budding charms of the childish, yet so splendidly developing figure, he began to understand that something very serious was about to take place in his life. But he gave no sign—first because she could not possibly have understood, and secondly because, while listening to her childish chatter about the sea-weed and shells she had brought with her, he was still merged in an astonishment too deep to be thus easily got rid of.

When the grateful father, with his accustomed hospitality, pressed him to join the family circle at tea, it seemed to himself a matter of course to acquiesce. He would thus gain an hour in which to watch the creature just discovered, and to come to some conclusion regarding his own sensations.

By the time he left the house to return to the Towers everything was clear to him, and he even knew exactly what he was going to do.

These sudden resolutions were characteristic of David, who—unlike the majority of men whose nature shows a vein of doggedness—never took very long to think over anything that appeared to him good to do. There are men enough capable of strong impressions, but not very many in whom these impressions are so tenacious as to produce tangible results. Having decided that this blue-eyed child with the fearless glance and the caressing movements was the right woman for him, he

immediately began looking about for the means of gaining her. He was poor and so was she—that much was pretty clear—and to marry without any money at all appeared in the eyes of the shrewd Scotchman foolish. But he would find a way—in fact he had already thought of one. Most of the tasks he had set to himself yet had been accomplished, and so would this one be. It had been the same in his boyhood when he had undertaken to rear rabbits at school under peculiarly unfavourable circumstances, or to force the most out-of-the-way plants to grow in his garden in the very teeth of an inimical climate—nor had he ever been chary of setting himself these tasks. There was in him an exceptionally great fund of mental and bodily energy, which required something on which to exercise itself, just as an athlete feels the need of exercising his muscles, and misses the movement when opportunity lacks.

Lately the object had been awanting, since other people had settled everything for him, but now with one bound his nature had emancipated itself and was revelling in the new-found feeling of independence.

Next day he left the Towers, having spoken no word to his cousin, and having done his best to avoid his aunt's questioning glances.

At home there were more questioning glances to encounter, but these he cut short by announcing that he had given up the idea of the army, and that he intended, after all to accept that offer of a farm in Australia, which had been under consideration a short time ago. The offer had come from a younger brother of Mr. M'Farrel who had been set-

tled in the Colonies for many years past, and who was evidently acting on orders, for nothing would have pleased the possessor of Craigie Towers better than to see this inconvenient nephew—who threatened to become a son-in-law—safely placed on the other side of the ocean. The opening had presented quite exceptional advantages, but David, who was too deeply rooted in his native soil to have any taste for colonial life, had at that time refused point-blank. He had now reconsidered his resolution, as he announced to his father, decisively, yet without giving his reasons.

“And this on the eve of the examinations?” asked the old man, aghast—“and you so splendidly prepared! You’re certain to pass, David.”

“I know, but I don’t want to pass.”

The father looked at the son’s face, and protested only by one more question, indirectly, timidly.

“Then nothing has been settled between you and Monica?”

He was sitting at his weather-beaten writing-table in the little back study, and David stood at the window, looking out at the rows of vividly green gooseberry bushes, all laden with unripe fruit, yet all with an air of crouching towards the ground—it was a trick they had learned by experience, seeing that whichever one had had the audacity to put its nose above the wall, had from time immemorial been incontinently nipped by the wind.

“No,” was David’s reply. “Nothing has been settled, but I have come to the conclusion that I cannot marry her.”

"She will be disappointed," ventured Mr. Ellis, wistfully.

"I know she will," said David, and his father could see him wince as he spoke. "It will have the appearance of my having behaved ill to her, but I should be behaving worse if I married her."

Mr. Ellis said very little more. Long since he had grown accustomed to David not only taking his own way but also keeping his own counsel. At the very beginning of the interview he had caught sight of a certain luminous far-away look in his son's eyes that he knew well, and that always indicated that his imagination was at work. Doubtless the boy was after some new idea—but the father's confidence in the son was such that even in the midst of his bewilderment he remained quite quiet regarding the straightness of the intentions concerned.

A few weeks later David was on his way to Australia. To put an ocean between himself and the woman he intended to gain seemed a strange way of setting about it; but David, who always went to the root of things, had understood that here lay a rare chance of making his fortune. If luck favoured him he might in a very few years be independent enough to marry, while to enter the army with his aunt's support withdrawn, would be, if not entirely unfeasible, almost equivalent to taking a vow of celibacy. Passionately though he loved his own country, there was no regret in his heart as he saw its shores fade. By losing it he was making the first step towards gaining that which he already felt was to become dearer to him than either home

or parents. In spirit he was already looking into the future and living in the company of the woman to whom his young and unspoiled heart had gone out in all its strength and tenderness. To win her for his wife was to be henceforward his dream, but the sort of dream for which some natures can do great deeds. It was to be a secret, too, as well as a dream, not because he loved secrecy, but because he could not bear the idea of speaking of her yet, even to his father. Men of action are seldom men of much speech, and David belonged eminently to the former class.

Not once during the three years of struggle that followed did David lose sight of his idea. Neither surroundings nor work were congenial, yet joyfully and patiently he worked towards his end, sustained by his one great hope and carried over many disagreeable realities by the imaginative vein that lay so deeply embedded in his eminently practical nature. It was only since that decisive day at St. Mallan's that he had discovered what he could really do. Until then he had lived as young men mostly live, neither over-lax nor over-strict in his conduct, but from that moment the decisive change came over him; the necessity of keeping himself unsullied for her sake made of him a different man.

At the end of those three years perseverance and luck had placed him in a position which made the idea of marriage quite feasible, and with hope swelling his heart, he set sail for home.

And then, just as he was preparing to take the first direct step by renewing acquaintance with the doctor's family, there had come the announcement



of a very simple fact—that of the marriage of the doctor's daughter.

It was almost incredible that he should not have sufficiently foreseen this danger. The possibility had indeed crossed his mind once or twice lately, and had even caused him to anticipate the date originally fixed for his home-coming, but he had never seriously feared to arrive too late. She had appeared to him to be so deeply buried in her country retreat that, despite all possibilities, he had persisted in considering her safe from other men; and besides, and in despite of all sober calculation of time, he had continued to think of her as the short-frocked child who had first captured his imagination. Even now it seemed hard to believe that she had reached a marriageable age more than a year ago. But, more than anything else, a sort of obstinate belief both in himself and in his good luck, had kept him blind to the danger he was running.

With all the more violence did the shock of disappointment fall upon him. For a short time he was too much stunned to think about what he ought to do next. He had staked everything on one chance, and having lost it, seemed to have lost even his interest in living. Then, slowly, the vitality of his nature began to reassert itself. Without interest, yet with a certain dogged determination not to confess himself so entirely beaten by Fate, he began to look about him for some other plan on which to rearrange his life. His first impulse had been to fly the country by returning straight to Australia, but on this wish reaction soon followed. He asked himself why, since his object was missed,

he should continue to be an exile. The motive power which for three years had sustained him was gone. He had never cared for riches for their own sake, scarcely even for comfort—he would not continue to make sacrifices for himself alone.

As abruptly as he had decided to adopt colonial life, as abruptly did he now elect to abandon it. The lookers-on wondered greatly at his instability of purpose, guessing little that it was the very firmness with which his purpose had stood which was the cause of the present change. Three years ago he had been better prepared for the army examinations than nine-tenths of the candidates, and he never forgot anything he had once learnt thoroughly—he would try his luck in that direction, having a little money now to supplement his pay. It would be taking up his life again almost at the point at which he had abandoned it on the day of the fateful expedition in St. Mallan's bay.

CHAPTER IV.

THOSE three years passed in Australia had been very long to some one else besides David himself.

On the day when, after various small episodes which had helped to confirm the hope planted in her heart by her mother, David had left the house without speaking any decisive word, Monica began to taste of the bitterness of loving without return. Her mother said "He will write"; but she knew that he would not write. Love may be blind on occasions, but on others it sees twice as far and twice as deep as its neighbours; and in the very tone of his voice and the very pressure of his hand at parting she had read a change since yesterday, so subtle as to have escaped all observation but her own, yet in which she immediately recognised the sealing of her fate.

When the weeks that followed on David's sudden departure for Australia had convinced even her mother of the collapse of her projects, a great transformation came over Monica. During his visit she had betrayed her affection for her cousin with an almost naïve candour, for, having been taught by her mother from earliest childhood to regard David as her future husband, she had seen no special reason for affecting an indifference which she did not feel. It was his unexpected defection which suddenly matured her, and made of the child

a woman. A weaker nature might have broken down under the trial, a less equally balanced character have abandoned itself headlong to its grief, a woman with a germ of bitterness in her soul have become hardened for life; but with Monica none of these things happened. The change was in another direction. With shame—and yet with a shame by which she would not let herself be mastered—she now remembered the many marks of favour she had shown her cousin, and was conscious principally of the necessity of re-establishing her injured womanly dignity. That David probably loved some other woman she had very soon guessed. It was the only explanation of his conduct which seemed plausible to her, but so brave a face did she put upon her own disappointment that not even her own mother guessed how much she suffered, nor what jealous doubts pursued her in these days.

Yet not even to herself did she make any vows of dying an old maid, for her nature was impregnated with honest common-sense, and she knew, that to remain single would be equivalent to breaking her mother's heart. Since she could not be happy herself she saw no reason why she should not make her mother happy.

But in this point her will proved better than her powers. Whatever suitors were brought forward—and in her anger at her ungrateful nephew Mrs. M'Farrel smiled broadly upon every eligible young man in the neighbourhood—and however honestly she endeavoured to find pleasure in their society, it always happened that at the critical moment her strength broke down. Regarded as acquaintances,

and even friends, some of them were quite acceptable; the moment they were viewed as possible husbands they each and all became detestable, and always it was the image of a certain broad-shouldered figure, with flashing brown eyes which stepped in and forbade her to proceed. It was exactly to this good-will of hers, joined to these sudden weaknesses, that she owed the undeserved reputation of being a peculiarly dangerous flirt, one of the sort that lets a man go on to the very brink before drawing back suddenly and leaving him exposed to ridicule. Yet so yellow was her hair, so white her skin, and so well mounted her mother's house that, despite her reputation, she found herself much in demand, even on the London market. No one, to look at her tranquil blue eyes and to hear her clear, well-modulated laugh, would have taken her for a love-lorn damsel. Sentimentality had no part in her nature; it was in spite, so to say, of her own cool reason, that for three years she had continued to be faithful to the faithless David's memory. The news of his return had thrilled her in a way which she clearly recognised as foolish. During all these years she had scarcely ceased to puzzle over the situation, and now she knew less than ever what to make of it. David was not married to any one else, but neither did he show any intention of again drawing towards her. Though he had passed several weeks at home he had not found it worth while—or perhaps he had not dared—to come to the Towers. Then came the news of his having entered the army. So he had given up his Australian prospects. Why? Had any change come into his life? Monica puzzled once more, without reaching

a conclusion, and in spite of everything, and although he still gave no sign, she could not help hoping a little—a very little.

It was not at St. Mallan's, but in London, during the following season that she saw him again for the first time. Mrs. M'Farrel would never have thought of letting Monica spend a season at Craigie. Was it not bad enough having passed her twenty-second birthday without her choice being made? And Monica, who in all matters of detail was the most acquiescent of daughters, though in reality she never yielded beyond a certain point, had not attempted to protest.

She had already taken her place at the well-appointed dinner-table in the London house of a —shire neighbour, when her eye was caught by the cloud on the face of her mother, sitting almost straight opposite. Mrs. M'Farrel was a small, plump person, all composed of circles and semi-circles, with a neat, dark-brown head, and most appetising glimpses of a skin as white as that of her daughter's, and gleaming through the black lace of her bodice with an almost sensational effect, and to whom only her black eyebrows (and these too were semi-circular) gave a certain appearance of strongmindedness, not always justified by her conduct. Just now she was eating her soup with a look of severe concentration which Monica knew by experience. A glance round the table soon discovered the cause of this agitation, for, almost to her consternation, Monica had recognised her cousin David sitting only a few places off—a good deal changed, of course, but quite unmistakable. There was nothing very astonishing about it either,

since she knew that he was quartered at Regent's Park. Ever since she was in town she had been steeling herself for a meeting, and yet the moment itself found her unprepared. She was not quite sure whether it was joy or pain that she felt, but the emotion, whichever it was, so seized upon her that she required all her self-control in order to sit quietly through the rest of dinner. Would he speak to her later on? she asked herself with beating heart. Would he make any effort to heal that breach which, although never openly acknowledged, had for four years past tactitly divided the two branches of the family? She might have been sure that he would, for David never failed to do what seemed to himself the simple and straightforward thing. Scarcely had the men reached the drawing-room than already she saw him approaching her mother, and, watching the interview from afar, and noting how the thunder-cloud on Mrs. M'Farrel's face melted into half-unwilling sunshine, she knew that his pardon was already as good as secured. After that, she told herself, her turn would come, and of course it did.

With genuine pleasure on his face and a hand stretched openly towards her, David drew near to his cousin. The long lapse of time since their last meeting had for him completely eliminated all embarrassment from the situation. He knew that she had cared for him once, but he was not conceited enough to suppose that she had not long since surmounted what had probably been the passing fancy of a very young girl.

"I know I am to blame," he said, quickly, before she had even spoken. "I ought to have re-

ported myself at Craigie, and I ought to have looked you up here. Aunt Mercy is evidently very vexed with me. Are you going to tell me the same thing that she has told me, Monica?"

He spoke earnestly and seriously, not having the knack of treating things lightly which appeared to himself to be serious, and although this was obviously an occasion for bridging over a difficult position with some hare-brained joke. Monica was more thankful than she could say for the absence of that joke.

He had sat down beside her as he spoke and she could see his face quite near. It was the same face that she had had before her mind's eye for four years past, only squarer and browner, the same suggestion of vigour and self-reliance which had captured her girlish fancy, and only with less light in the eyes than she seemed to remember.

"I am not going to tell you the same thing," she said, apparently quite happy, when she had found her voice. "I am sure Mamma has told you all you need to know. I will tell you, on the contrary, that I am very glad to see you," and as she spoke she found the courage to look at him with a smile on her lips, for the habit of self-control is apt quickly to take the upper hand.

"And you forgive me quite?" he asked, looking at her, as it seemed to her, with a double significance in his glance.

"Quite; but only on condition that you come to see us now without delay."

"If I really thought that my aunt wished it——"

"She does. It is only if you don't come to see

us that she would be seriously vexed. I was so glad to hear that you got on so well in Australia," she added, after a moment's pause.

It could not escape her that his face darkened as he answered.

"Yes, it all went smooth enough over there."

"I hear you are quite rich," she said, as lightly as she could.

"Not rich, but I had struck the road to becoming so."

"Then what made you leave the road?" it was on the tip of her tongue to say, but she restrained herself in time.

"I suppose you got home-sick," she remarked instead.

"Yes, I got home-sick," he dreamily acquiesced. "Three years was as much as I could manage."

"Your soldiers are no doubt more satisfactory than Australian colonists."

"They do well enough," said David, without any especial enthusiasm in his voice. "And if only some one or other would declare war they would do better yet." And for the first time she saw his eyes light up in the way she remembered so well.

They sat silent beside each other for some moments more, aware that there lay many unexplained things between them, but knowing that they must remain unexplained, at any rate for the present.

On the way home that evening Mrs. M'Farrel remarked abruptly to her daughter—

"He wants to come and see us, but I've half a mind to show him the door."

"What for?" asked Monica, calmly. "He hasn't done anything bad, that I know of."

"He's behaved like a fool," was the irate reply. "And for an Ellis to behave like a fool is always bad. He knows quite well that he might have had the Towers, if he'd wanted."

"Perhaps he didn't want them, Mamma."

"That's just what shows that he's a fool, and I don't see the object of receiving fools in my house."

Monica was apparently studying the effect of the lamplight on the house-fronts, for she remained silent.

"Why don't you say something?" said Mrs. M'Farrel, having in vain tried to get a glimpse of her daughter's face, and moving restlessly in her corner. "Don't you agree about David?"

"No, I don't."

"Then you would like me to receive him?"

"I think it would be quite unjust not to receive him."

"Well, well, we'll see about it." Mrs. M'Farrel collapsed into her corner once more with a gentle grunt of dissatisfaction. And Monica knew that David would be received.

And so he was a few days later, under protest, as it were, yet not entirely ungraciously. Until she saw him again Mrs. M'Farrel had been under the impression that she hated her nephew for his conduct of four years past, but at sight of him she had been surprised to feel all the old sympathy once lavished on the brown-eyed boy stirring again at the bottom of her intrinsically faithful heart. And together with the sympathy it was almost unavoidable that hope also should stir. Long since she

had suspected that it was just David and nothing else that lay at the bottom of Monica's repeated refusals of the most eligible men; and, although she understood his motives of action as little as Monica did, she could, as little as her daughter, shut herself up from the idea that, since David was still free, there could be no reason why the ancient dream of marrying her rich daughter to her brother's poor son might not yet come true.

It was with this idea in her mind that she allowed her original hostility of manner to melt into the cordiality of former days, and this so rapidly and entirely that Monica herself, who possessed far more moderation than her lively parent, felt compelled to protest against the too frequent invitations now pressed upon him. "It might frighten him off," she said to herself, although she had not yet arrived at acknowledging to herself what it was that he might be frightened off from.

If she had had anything like a serious hope it died a speedy death barely three weeks after the day on which the door in Park Street had been reopened to David.

The partner with whom she was sitting out a round dance was a countryman, though introduced to her but half an hour before—a beardless, and, for a Scotchman, incredibly talkative youth—who looked as little married as possible, but who, to her astonishment, opened conversation by pointing out to her his wife among the dancers. He did so with a certain pride which was either absurd or touching, as you chose to take it.

"We've only been married since last November," he explained, visibly swelling with delight,

"but we had been engaged for three years." (Monica could not help reflecting that he must have engaged himself somewhere about sixteen.) "Came home from Australia on purpose to fetch her, and going out again this autumn—together."

"You came back from Australia in November?" asked Monica, with a new shade of interest.

"Yes, in November, in the Prince Albert. We landed at Leith."

"Why, then, you must have been a fellow-passenger of a cousin of mine. Do you happen to remember him, I wonder—a Mr. Ellis?"

The confidential young man's face lighted up perceptibly.

"Ellis! to be sure! Why, we shared a cabin, and I got quite fond of him, though he left all the talking to me. So you are his cousin? What a queer chance! No doubt you can tell me if his marriage came off all right? I've often wondered how he's getting on."

"His marriage? What do you mean?"

"Yes, he told me himself that he was coming home to be married, exactly the same as I myself, and I fancy it must have come off by this time."

"He told you that?" said Monica, turning upon the speaker's fortunately not observant gaze a face that had grown suddenly colourless.

"He did, most positively—said that there were some matters still to settle, and asked me not to speak of it just yet; but I suppose it's all right now, since it's quite eight months ago, and everything is properly settled by this time."

Half a minute was all Monica required to recover herself, and she had had that now.

"The matters are not quite settled yet, I am afraid," she said steadily, carefully re-arranging the bracelets on her arm. "At any rate the marriage has not yet taken place."

"Oh, I *am* sorry!" said the gushing youth, with unmistakable sincerity. "I had hoped he was at least as happy as I am."

Next time that David showed himself in Park Street, Monica seized upon the first chance of a *tête-à-tête*, for she was determined to get at the bottom of the matter.

They had been sitting all three in Mrs. M'Farrel's luxurious boudoir, when another visitor was announced, and the plump hostess, rolling over the rich carpet like a ball of mauve-coloured silk, had disappeared through the door of the larger and more ceremonious reception room. Knowing that she might be called for any moment, Monica turned straight towards David.

"This time, David," she said, with a well-drilled smile on her lips and in her voice a tremor too slight to be detected by any masculine ear, "it is I who am going to scold you, and soundly, too. What do you mean by going and getting engaged without giving your relations as much as a hint? Didn't you know that I should want to be the first to congratulate you?"

She looked at him bravely, with reproachful blue eyes. A little time ago she would have hesitated to say anything so direct, but these last weeks had established a certain cousinly intimacy which justified the unceremonious tone.

Instead of answering at once, David raised his head abruptly, and stared at her with eyes so blank

that she began to feel frightened, without knowing why.

"What are you saying?" he asked, almost heavily, after a moment of complete silence, and instinctively lowering his voice, so as not to be heard through the half open door.

"I was told the other day that you were engaged," faltered Monica, suddenly losing courage.

"By whom?"

"A man I had only been introduced to. I had a round dance with him. He said he came home with you last November, and you told him yourself. I think his name was Russel."

David recognised the name of the gushing fellow-passenger with whom he had exchanged some words he remembered but vaguely, just before leaving the steamer. What exactly he had said he could not swear to now, for that had been before the discovery of his great disappointment. It all seemed so far away, so impossible to realise the buoyancy of that state of mind which had acquired the relief of an outlet.

Monica, watching his face, had no explanation for the various emotions that flitted across it during that moment, but she saw unmistakably that he was suffering.

"Probably it was a mistake," she murmured, anxious only to put an end to the situation.

"It was a lie," said David, starting suddenly from his chair. "I never said anything of the sort, and if I did, I was mad at the time. I am not engaged to be married, nor even thinking of it. I shall never marry any woman, not any one, do you hear? You may tell that to Mr. Russel or to who-

ever cares to know; it is no secret. Do you hear me, Monica?"

The words were not less intensely spoken for having to be said in a hushed tone—and even in the midst of his evident excitement David did not forget the open door. The short, fierce whisper said more than the loudest speech could have done.

"Yes, I hear you," said Monica, a little faintly.

As he stood over her, angry, almost threatening, she could not help shrinking a little from before his flaming eyes. His words had killed the poor little hope within her, but that fiery glance had put new chains upon her, chains which she now knew she would never be able to shake off. Her slender, white-clad figure, pressed into the corner of the deep easy-chair, and the shining bands of hair upon her pure forehead, gave her just now the typical appearance of a martyr—even the halo was there, and only the palm wanting. And this time appearances spoke true, for it was from this moment that her real martyrdom dated. Yet so strong had habit made her that when David said again peremptorily, though hurriedly (for already the first summons had come from the drawing-room), "You will contradict this report if you hear it again?" not a muscle of her face betrayed the torture within, as she whispered, even in rising, "Of course, I will. I promise that you shall never again be annoyed by the false story."

Her tone was convincing, her smile reassuring, yet in her heart all was bewilderment. Within these last five minutes the mystery seemed to her to have deepened to tenfold its former darkness.

CHAPTER V.

ALL this time David had not seen Lady Alington—purposely not seen her, for he knew her to be in London. Though relying perfectly on himself he yet instinctively gave a wide berth to the profitless emotions likely to be awakened by a meeting. What object could there be in following up the trail of a dead dream? he asked himself, with his customary soberness of judgment, and why torture himself with gazing on the woman who could never belong to him? It was the sensible thing to do, undoubtedly, yet abstinence brought with it a torture of its own—that of unsatisfied curiosity. He had seen her only as a child, not as a woman, and the question as to how she had developed would leave him no peace. That she had grown beautiful he knew already; the very tone in which he heard her name pronounced when the stars of the season were enumerated was enough to tell him that, but what he craved after was the testimony of his own eyes. What he wanted to know was whether the charms he had seen in bud had bloomed in exactly the way he had expected, or in some other way not foreseen by him. And then there was another thing he wanted to know: did she love her husband? The oftener her name was spoken before him the more did he wonder at not hearing that

of Sir Augustus. Why was there never any mention of the husband? What sort of a man had she married? He disdained to ask, though he might have had the information a dozen times over, merely at the cost of a question.

The season was waxing towards its height before he had his first glimpse of her, and it was Monica herself who innocently called his attention to the woman who had ruined her own chances of happiness.

This new phase of his life began for David one Sunday during the Church Parade in the Park. In company with his aunt and his cousin he had turned into the Row, where all three were sitting at a good vantage point, idly watching the defiling of that portion of the world that calls itself "all London." Monica, who in her quality of frequenter of the season, was doing the honours, as it were, had been pointing out to David various notabilities, when, in exactly the same tone in which she had mentioned a newly married Duchess and a successful American actress, she remarked:

"There is another of the beauties, in the victoria over there. Lady Alington; she's a St. Malan's girl, by the bye, a townswoman of mine, I may say, though we knew each other but slightly in the old days. It was her face that made her fortune, for her father is a rather small doctor. There, do you see her over there?"

Instinctively David got up from his chair in order to have a better view, but was only in time to catch the flash of the sunlight upon her back hair, and to guess at the outline of her shoulders as she leant back against the cushions.

"Too late," he said with apparent quiet, as he sat down again, "I have missed her."

"Then you have missed a good deal, for she really is quite out of the common. But you will have another chance on Thursday, for she has promised to come to our 'At Home,' and of course you will be there too?"

"No, I cannot come," was David's first rapid, almost mechanically spoken, answer; but when Monica, quite unaware of what she was doing, pressed him with questions as to the reason of this refusal, he became foolishly aware that he had none to give, not even to himself, since he would not admit the existence of any distinct danger. Two minutes ago he had been resolved to be present at his aunt's party—was it not giving too much importance to an episode now definitively closed, to alter his plans because of the mention of a name?

"Perhaps it can be managed," he replied at last to Mrs. M'Farrel, who had vigorously mixed herself in the discussion; "I will think of it."

And he did nothing but think of it during the three days that separated him from Thursday—fruitlessly and wearily think of it without coming to any conclusion. Yet when the morning of the day came he knew that he would go; not that his own arguments had convinced himself, but that the curiosity that was consuming him, and which that vision of hair and of shoulders had only sharpened, would have its rights. He would go, yes, but only to shut the mouth of that inner hunger once for all. Just one look he would take in order to convince himself, and then, for ever after, he would

stand out of her path. The situation appeared to himself to be quite simple, however painful.

Also it was with something of the solemn feeling of a man who is taking definite leave of a piece of his life that he entered the crowded rooms in Park Street, his features set in anything but festive expression, his gaze dark though steady, dimly aware of the necessity of watching not only over every movement but also over every thought.

And yet it seemed that nothing was to come of it. The first hour passed in a series of expectations which turned into as many disappointments. Now it was the back view of a golden-brown head seen across the crowded room which caused his breath to come suddenly quicker; again the brief glance of a neck and shoulders caught between a forest of black coats, made his heart stand suddenly still; but in the next instant the golden-brown head turned and revealed a strange face, while a closer glance showed that the neck which had so disturbed him was touched with raven-black locks. Pretty faces in plenty, and flashing teeth and shining eyes, but none that was not either familiar or else profoundly indifferent.

When an hour had passed the tension of his nerves began, through the force of these very disappointments, slowly to relax. Already he told himself that, after all, to-day was not to be the final day, when unexpectedly he found himself so close to her that their elbows had actually touched before, with a sudden shiver of astonishment, he had understood that it was she.

In the next room, a popular singer had uttered

the first notes of a popular ballad, and, quite against his own will, David found himself caught in the heart of the elegant mob that was working its way towards the momentary centre of attraction, one of those human whirlpools which are unavoidable wherever the number of guests distinctly surpasses the available space. He had at first been aware only of a pale green gown whose train was covering his shoes and even wrapping itself round one of his ankles. The obstacle annoyed him as much as the people pressing around him, and forcing him to press in his turn, annoyed him, while all his efforts were concentrated on reaching a freer position. So occupied was he with his object as to be scarcely aware of how white were the shoulders that issued from the pale-green gown, nor took note of the colour of the fashionably-dressed hair that almost brushed his chin, until an impatient exclamation was spoken close to him.

"Talk of civilisation!" said a voice, whose sound vibrated to the depth of his memory. "A stampede of savages can't be much worse than *this!*"

She had not yet done speaking when David, despite the difficulty of the situation, bent quickly forward and looked into her face. Yes, it was she! Not as he had known her, but as he had known that she must become, with all that she had had then, and much, very much, that had come to her since. The same wonderfully-coloured, long-fringed eyes, only with a new depth in them, the same melting tints of complexion, ripened and, as it were, confirmed by maturity, and on the glistening lips a smile, addressed to her neighbour, half

angry and half amused, as she dropped the scornful words. In the moment of final recognition David, in a sort of terror, attempted to draw back, but the crowd was there on all sides, barring his passage. He was a prisoner within those living walls, together with her, forced to bear for a little longer the mingled agony and rapture of her close proximity. At this moment her shoulder actually touched his sleeve; it was his breath that fluttered the loose rings of her hair; he could note the very rise and fall of the diamond star on her bosom; she was almost in his arms, and yet unaware of his presence.

This much he took note of before a sort of mental vertigo seized on him, making of the next few minutes for ever after only a blotted picture in his brain. When again he became clearly aware of his surroundings, he was out of the worst of the crush. The larger room had somehow been reached, and, with his back against the wall, he was listening vaguely to the last notes of the ballad ringing out above the conversations which it had succeeded in hushing, though not in silencing. Again he had lost sight of her, but this time not for long. The song was not yet over when he discovered the pale-green dress in a corner, fenced round by half-a-dozen faultless evening coats. That sight filled him with a sudden feeling of anger, inexplicable to himself. He had meant to look at her only from a distance, but how was it possible to get even a clear view of her face with that cloud of grinning and smirking dandies hovering ever between him and her? To judge of her properly he would need to join the group. And was there any reason why he

should not do so? he presently began to ask himself. Why should the privilege of speaking to her be confined to those inane-looking, well-groomed youths? These questions began to grow within him as he jealously watched the corner.

"She is looking my way now," he presently said to himself. "Has she not seen me yet?" And he purposely moved a few steps forward, in order to be full in her view. Wasted pains! Her eyes came his way and passed over him, exactly as they passed over many others, dully and vaguely, with neither interest nor recognition. He felt the blood mounting to his forehead. Somehow he had not been prepared for this; that she should overlook him, yes, but that, looking at him, she should not know him again appeared to him preposterous. That meeting which had been the turning-point of his existence must at least have left a memory in her.

"Is she perhaps ashamed of knowing me?" he doggedly asked himself. "Has the doctor's daughter grown too great a lady to vouchsafe me a bow? Well, we shall soon see that. I have at least as good a right to claim acquaintance as any of these curled drawing-room apes." And, in a quite new mood, he went in search of his cousin Monica.

"Want to be introduced to Lady Alington?" asked Monica, readily. "Of course; how stupid of me! I had meant to point her out to you, only that my hands are so extra full to-night. But it seems that you have found her out for yourself. A countrywoman to be proud of, isn't she?"

"I have seen her," said David, shortly, "but I

want to speak to her. I suppose there is no harm in that?" he asked, with a touch of defiance.

"Harm! My dear David, what queer ideas you have! Don't people come to 'At Homes' in order to be spoken to? Come along, I'll make you acquainted."

He had told himself that surely when she saw him close she would recognise him, but the first glance of her eyes as Monica pronounced his name showed him his mistake. They were indifferent, those eyes, to the point of blankness, and the smile on her lips was the stereotyped society smile which already he had got to hate. A remark as stereotyped, regarding either the atmosphere of the room or the quality of the music that had just come to an end, was evidently on the point of issuing from those same so rich and yet so fresh lips, when all at once, another air was struck up at the piano, and in an instant all the languor vanished from the beautiful face before him.

"Ah, that's better!" she said, in a tone of sudden liveliness, while a new light shot through her eyes. "I wonder how she's going to sing it."

"Like an Englishwoman," was David's somewhat disdainful remark. "Her very 'a—a—auld' is enough for me."

It was "Auld Lang Syne" which had succeeded the ballad aforementioned.

"Are *you* a Scotchman?" asked Lady Alington, quickly, looking at him attentively for the first time.

"I am happy to say I am."

"A real Scotchman? From what part do you come, Mr.—?"

"Ellis," said David, briefly, unable to keep his eyes from dwelling on her face. Her flowing green draperies, her white arms issuing from the frothy lace, called back to his mind the first impression she had given him when standing on the rock with her wet, disordered hair, and her heap of seaweeds beside her—that of some sea-nymph newly risen from the waves. The present ravishing disarrangement of her locks was artistic and premeditated, and the drops that now shone there were not water but diamonds; yet, in some irresistible manner, these two moments seemed to draw together across the interval that lay between them, and to melt, as it were, into one.

"I come from Longbridge," he added, in answer to her question.

"That isn't so very far from St. Mallan's, is it? I don't know the place, but I have a sort of idea where it is."

"No, it isn't so very far; and I have been at St. Mallan's too."

Another flash passed over her face. "You have been at St. Mallan's? Actually there? Do you know it well? Have you been there often? Perhaps to play golf? Isn't it beautiful?"

She was looking only at him now, oblivious of the presence of the somewhat discomfited handful of dandies, who, aware of their superfluity, had discreetly retired into the background.

"I have been there only once with my senses about me—I mean, since I was a child."

For himself it was only that one time that counted—the visit of last November was a thing he could not bear to dwell upon.

"Is that all?" There was an accent of disappointment in her voice. "But didn't you find it beautiful, at least that once?"

"I thought it the most beautiful place in the world."

"Had you good weather? Did you see any good sunsets over the rocks?"

"I had one perfect day—one I shall never forget, and the sunset in particular was wonderful."

Lady Alington rapped her closed fan upon the open palm of her left hand with a little gesture of approval.

"That's right!" she said, heartily. "I see that you appreciate your native land. You must come and see me some day, in order to give me your impressions of St. Mallan's. We live in Forest Place, and all countrymen are welcome there. You promise to come, do you not? And now we must stop talking, and listen to 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

CHAPTER VI.

LADY ALINGTON was having a particularly bad day to-day, which means that Sir Augustus had been more than usually affectionate. In London this often happened. Perhaps the sight of the admiration with which his wife was surrounded made him feel the necessity of keeping himself more prominently before her eyes. Without his ever having ventured to question her right to any act whatever, she had long ago discovered that he inclined to jealousy—the watchful glance of his one eye was enough to tell her that—and except for a momentary feeling of irritation, the discovery left her indifferent. If it had not been for the occasional efforts—always awkward and always violent—made by the unlucky man to awaken in her some response to his own undiminished ardour, she could still have continued to look on him as a faithful, though not particularly entertaining friend. If she was not able to do so, the fault was his alone.

To-day he had been so aggressively tender that it had taken all Jessie's diplomacy to induce him to visit his club. Finding herself at length alone, she threw herself moodily into the nearest armchair, and gave herself up deliberately to an afternoon of ill-humour—real genuine ill-humour, altogether distinct from the habitual feeling of dissatisfaction

which seemed rooted within her, and which she had been as little able to get rid of at St. Mallan's as in London. Yes; Augustus was certainly becoming insupportable, and, besides, it was pouring cats and dogs outside, and nobody was likely to call; and as for that, she was not quite sure whether it would not be a greater bore if they did call. She was still turning over this question in her mind, idly twisting the bracelet on her arm the while, when Mr. Ellis was announced.

"Ellis?" She had to think for a moment before she recalled the name. Before she had quite succeeded, the sight of his face came to refresh her memory. To be sure, that was the new Scotchman who knew St. Mallan's, and who had criticised the accent of the singer of "Auld Lang Syne" so severely. She rose with a movement of pleasure that came unexpectedly to herself. It would be something at least to fill the afternoon with reminiscences of her home and of the old days.

"Ah, so you have kept your promise?" she said, almost gaily, "and on such a day as this, too!"

"A Scotchman always keeps his promises," replied David, with a gravity which seemed quite unsuitable to the occasion; "and surely you have never known one who was afraid of a bucketful of water?"

"Never," she agreed, laughing. "Though I know a good many Londoners whose moustaches would go sadly out of curl in this atmosphere."

"Londoners!" There was a ring of unmistakable contempt in his voice. "What have I got to do with them?"

"Not very much, it seems to me," and she looked at his square, sun-browned face and deep-set eyes approvingly. "But never mind that now. It's all the better about the moustaches and the rain, you know, for that will keep them at home, and we'll have the field clear for a regular Scotch gossip. I'll just ring for tea, and then we'll make ourselves comfortable."

"Are you alone?" asked David, looking about him as though hesitating, and still holding his hat in his hand.

"Quite alone, I am glad to say. Why don't you sit down?"

He obeyed slowly, as though against the grain. To find her alone both frightened and delighted him. He had not counted on this circumstance. In the visions he had had of this visit Sir Augustus had always been hovering in the background; indeed, the expectation (it could not exactly be called hope) of seeing Jessie Alington's husband had had its part in keeping him to the fulfilment of the promise which he had been surprised into giving—that and the obstinate resolve of forcing her to remember him. To abandon an object once set to himself was a thing of which he was constitutionally incapable, and since he had not succeeded the other night in recalling himself to her memory, he would visit her just once in order to make himself known. With what gain to himself or her? This he did not stop to ask himself—perhaps was no longer in the proper state of mind to ask himself—but was at least clear on the point that it could be with no harm. That he could ever be tempted to make love to another man's wife did not seem to himself

a possible contingency, and, besides, what could happen to him in one single visit?

And yet, in the very face of these soothing reflections, he felt ill at ease with himself, and betrayed it in his manner; for a strong man does not grow weak without certain phases of acute suffering, unknown to the weak ones of the race.

"And now," said Jessie, leaning back once more in her chair, with the folds of her cream-coloured tea-gown flowing around her, "we can begin. Tell me first. When were you at St. Mallan's? Not so very long ago, I hope?"

"Four years ago."

"Oh dear! Then you haven't seen it since I have. Your impressions must be rather stale, I fear."

"They are the most vivid things in my life," said David, looking at her far harder than he was aware of. No, after all, she was not exactly what he had expected her to be. Seen by daylight, and with the first flurry of meeting no longer clouding his eyes, he recognised clearly that she had grown even more beautiful than it had been possible to foresee.

"But they seem to have been very brief. How long were you there, that time you spoke of?"

"Only about a fortnight, and I saw very little of St. Mallan's proper during the time. It was at Craigie Towers that I was staying, with my aunt."

"Really, Mr. Ellis, you are turning out a fraud," said Jessie, in a tone of dawning vexation. "If that is all you have to say of St. Mallan's——"

"But I have told you that it seemed to me the most beautiful place in the world."

"That's better. Do you know, it was really only after I left it that I found out St. Mallan's was beautiful. I can't tell you how *thirsty* I sometimes feel for the smell of salt water and wet sand, and how I could just scream out for want of that wide horizon across the sea. These London houses choke me."

"But you are not always in London?" asked David, absurdly moved by even this approach to a confidence.

She gave her shoulder a slight shrug, which did not escape him.

"Oh, Allwood; but that isn't a bit more exhilarating than London. We're even further from the sea there, you know, not even a solitary sea-gull ever strays that way, and the nearest approach to seaweed is the duckweed on the pond."

"Yes, I know you are fond of seaweeds," said David, reflectively. "By the bye, why did you not wear seaweeds in your hair the other night? It would have been most appropriate with that sea-green dress."

"Because I wasn't masquerading as a mermaid, to be sure." And Lady Alington broke into a girlish peal of laughter. "Really, Mr. Ellis, you should write for a fashion paper. I had no idea you took such an interest in women's dress."

"And perhaps you think it slightly impertinent of a stranger to prescribe to you your headgear? But supposing I were to tell you that I am not entirely a stranger?"

"A countryman is never quite a stranger," said Jessie, slightly puzzled by his manner. "And be-

sides, I have known you since Mrs. M'Farrel's party."

"And you really think you never saw me before Mrs. M'Farrel's party?"

"I am certain I haven't; at least, not to my knowledge."

"Which shows the absolute unreliableness of human memory," said David, outwardly quite quietly, though devoured by a most unreasonable inward excitement. "In point of fact, I am an older acquaintance than—who shall I say?—than your husband, for instance."

"This is becoming very mysterious," and her eyes grew wide with wonder. "Can you be some schoolfellow of Jem's? Tell me quickly, please. You have made me just horribly curious!"

"Tell me this first: do you still make boating excursions? No—of course you don't in London; but do you remember your excursions in the St. Mallan's bay, and do you remember spending an uncomfortable half-hour on one of those little rocky islands——?"

"And being rescued by a strange man in a boat? Good gracious me, but that can't have been *you*?"

"Why not?" asked David, in a tone of slight irritation. "Is there anything that makes it impossible?"

"I suppose not," she said, doubtfully, glancing at the manly countenance and the well-shaped figure before her, and mentally comparing it with the bony and taciturn youth who had figured in her recollections. "That was four years ago, and people change a good deal at our age."

"You have not changed beyond recognition," he said, with unconscious reproach in his tone.

She noticed neither the remark nor the reproach. With a movement in which he recognised the fascinating tomboy of four years ago she had sprung to her feet, only to sit down again.

"This is delicious!" she cried, impulsively clapping her hands. "So the knight-errant has actually turned up again! That makes you belong to St. Mallan's in a much more real sort of way—it makes you part of a reminiscence. Why didn't you tell me this at once? Men are so funny, to be sure!"

"I waited to see if you would know me."

"And I was ungrateful enough not to know you? I see; but never mind, I'll atone. Here's your cup of tea as a first step towards atonement. Oh, this is as good as a play! Of course I remember that afternoon perfectly; and what a state papa was in! *He* wasn't ungrateful, even though I was. But I'm not really as bad as I look. I like nothing so much as thinking backward, and you'll help me to do so."

"Isn't it rather early to begin doing that?" asked David, smiling against his own will.

"Perhaps," she said, with a shadow on her face, but it's pleasanter often than thinking forward, and that's why I enjoy 'Auld Lang Syne' even if it's sung all wrong."

It was only when he was on his way back to his quarters that it occurred to David that Sir Augustus had not been as much as mentioned that afternoon. This was curious, and yet not curious. David knew already that to the true society woman

a husband is generally a more or less convenient appendage; but, despite her diamonds and the perfection both of her toilettes and of her tea-cakes, David somehow felt that Lady Alington had not become exactly a society woman, or at least had remained something beyond a society woman. Would it not have been natural, seeing that after the discovery of his identity she had appeared to range him at once into the category of old friends, that she should speak of introducing him to her husband? Could it be mere chance that not a word had been said? Well, he would soon judge for himself, since he had promised to go there again. It was true that the object he had insisted on attaining was now reached, he had forced her to remember him; but there had been a second object to that visit, that of seeing what the husband was like, and until he had succeeded in this too, he felt that he would not be able to give up his visits in Forest Place, but would go on tormenting himself with imaginary portraits of the man who had gained this so singularly desirable woman. What must he be like, this so fortunate individual whom, in the pride of her youth and beauty, she had chosen to give herself to? Assuredly he must be not only the handsomest, but also the noblest and most charming of his sex. To see him was an absolute necessity, and appeared to David almost in the light of a duty. He had for so long looked on this woman as his future wife, that in a vague way he felt responsible for her happiness. Since he could not have her himself, he must at least convince himself that she was happy with another. When he had done this he would be satisfied—at least he supposed so—for

this was to be the last, the very last, concession made to the manes of the irremediable past.

Unfortunately for his resolve, Sir Augustus was not visible at his next visit in Forest Place, while Lady Alington, busied with other guests, could not give him more than a momentary attention. He left after an hour of fruitless waiting, having not even caught sight of the tip of Sir Augustus' nose, but having had many opportunities of studying Sir Augustus' wife in profile, in full face, as well as in three-quarters, though generally only at a distance.

The third experiment he made, only a few days later, did not, at first sight, promise to be more successful. Again no Sir Augustus, and again a troop of visitors. He could not imagine why their presence should be so irksome, since he had nothing to say to Lady Alington that any of them could not have heard, and instinctively he asked himself whether they were irksome to her too? There was no mistaking the genuineness of the smile with which she welcomed her countryman, nor the indifference—evidently not considered worth masking—with which she listened to the "smart" conversation around her. It was even difficult to believe that these half languid, half scornful eyes were the same that had shone so tenderly and so joyfully while she had talked to him of her home. Last time already he had noticed that she seldom took part in the talk around her, only now and then dropping some unexpected remark which fell strangely from lips so young and fresh. Thus, to-day, when a fashionable matron had been elaborately lamenting the rapid passing of the season, and concluded her remarks by the unavoidable: "How

time passes, to be sure!" David was almost startled to see the hostess turn upon her visitor with something like anger in her face.

"That is not true!" she said, with sudden bitterness. "It isn't time that passes—that remains always the same—it is *we* who pass and disappear."

The remark was so much too serious for the occasion that an uncomfortable silence fell upon the audience. It was one of the bevy of *jeunesse dorée* present who broke it.

"By Jove! That's a new idea! Never heard it put that way before. Sounds somehow what the learned chaps call paradoxical, doesn't it! Hi, hi! Anyway, *you're* not passing yet, Lady Alington," and he fixed her with a stare of such impertinent admiration that David only with great trouble kept himself from slapping his smooth pink cheek on the spot.

"Not if that's the verb of which the past tense is *passée*," added a military, though bald-looking individual, who himself distinctly belonged to the tense referred to.

"I wasn't speaking of myself in particular," said Lady Alington, somewhat ungraciously.

"Nor of your friends either, I trust," put in the first speaker, with a brilliantly disagreeable smile.

"Nor of my friends either," said Jessie, while her lip curved strangely; "since my friends prefer to remain, and not to pass."

"For goodness sake let us not talk of passing," exclaimed a young Lancashire beauty who had recently made her entry in London. "The very word smells of churchyards and all sorts of disagreeable things. There's a lot of bother about

being alive, no doubt, but I prefer staying, anyway for a good bit yet! By the bye, what are the prospects for the Granger dance? Can any one tell me if it's worth spoiling a frock for? Floor, supper, and music, those are the three delicate points—particularly the supper, for I'm not one of those who can dance upon empty air. Mrs. Granger herself looks so ill-fed that I feel just a trifle nervous—but don't betray me, anybody—bless me! I hope I'm not speaking to any one of the Granger's bosom friends! No? What a comfort! Now begin, please, but don't all talk at once!"

While the desired information was pouring in upon the fair questioner, David's eyes suddenly met those of his hostess in a glance which he felt to be one of mutual understanding. But it was only when, ten minutes later, the room had emptied itself of all disturbing elements—for this time he had succeeded in outstaying the others—that he got the full explanation of this mute appeal.

"I wonder," mused Lady Alington aloud, as she let herself sink into the sofa again, with a movement as of physical exhaustion, "I wonder whether it is their fault or my fault that these Londoners bore me so fearfully? Am I stupider than they, I wonder? I either must be much stupider or much cleverer, for the things that amuse them certainly don't amuse me. Even the fishermen at St. Malan's seemed to me ever so much more entertaining than these."

"It is simply that you are different from them," said David, with a curious inward satisfaction at this confirmation of the guesses he had made at her individuality.

"Too provincial, perhaps? Or only too Scotch? But there are lots of Scotch Londoners, if it comes to that. It's the point of their jokes that escapes me, somehow. Now, that new girl, Miss Tellersley, she's supposed to be just awfully witty, but her questions about the Granger's dance struck me simply as rather rude and rather greedy. She goes in for the 'brutally frank' line, I'm told, but if only the Grangers had happened to come in while she was talking, you would have seen her almost fly into their arms and smother them with assurances of the pleasure she was tasting in advance, &c. And she's not taken long to learn it, either, since this is her first season."

"As for rudeness," said David, with an unwilling smile, "I shouldn't have exactly expected you to be an extra severe critic on this point. You were not what one calls over polite to that poor man with the shiny crown."

"I suppose I wasn't, but I couldn't help myself, and what I want to know is why I couldn't help myself? Why do their compliments appear to me so sickening and so sticky, like half-melted lumps of barley-sugar? They mean to be agreeable, I suppose. Is it because I know they say the same things to everybody else?"

She had leant her head against the sofa-back, and was looking up at him with an earnest question in her eyes, as though asking him to help her to an explanation, and, with a thrill that was more alarm than anything else, David recognised that, although he was only speaking to her for the third time since his return, already a sort of understanding had sprung up between them.

"It is because they are sham and you are genuine," David was beginning, when the door behind him opened softly, and in the big glass on the wall opposite he saw the reflection of a thin, sallow man, with a black band over one eye, who, with a questioning glance around him, was slipping unobtrusively into the room.

"Another visitor!" he groaned to himself, and turned round resignedly.

But Lady Alington was taking no steps to receive the new visitor, not so much as lifting her head from the sofa-cushion on to which she had flung it back impetuously.

"Is that you, Augustus, already?" came from her lips in a tone from which enthusiastic pleasure was conspicuously absent.

David looked at the man again and remarked that he had no hat in his hand. Could it be possible that——?

"You know Mr. Ellis, don't you?" Jessie was saying, languidly. "No, to be sure, I think you don't. Mr. Ellis, this is my husband."

As David, as in a dream, stepped forward to salute his host, he had to suppress the convulsive desire to laugh aloud. He thought he had heard aright, and yet the thing didn't seem quite conceivable.

And meanwhile he stood there with outstretched hand, too much dazed himself to observe that Sir Augustus hesitated for a moment before grasping it, or perhaps was only too much absorbed, as betrayed the watchful black eye which moved enquiringly from the stranger to his wife, and from his wife back again to the stranger.

CHAPTER VII.

As soon as David was in the street he indulged himself in a loud and distinctly ill-mannered laugh. He felt in indecently high spirits, without exactly knowing why. For weeks past he had been dreading and longing to see the man who had robbed him of Jessie Drummond. He had felt certain both of hating and of admiring him for the qualities which it stood to reason that he must possess. And behold, now that he knew him, he did neither one nor the other, and the strange part of it was that he felt as though he had only been half robbed, after all. Hatred seemed as much out of place here as admiration; it was wonder, pure and simple, that usurped his thoughts. What could she have married him for? That it should have been for love, this proposition was at once dismissed as untenable. For money? At the mere thought he felt a pang, as though of bodily pain, but only for an instant. In the next, already the unworthy suspicion had been hurled far from him. Black though the case might look against her, his lover's faith was too loyal to be so easily undermined. Of rashness she may have been guilty, of thoughtlessness and imprudence—but of baseness, never—for that he could pledge his soul.

This view, more an instinct than a belief, came

to be confirmed by the meetings which continued to take place, although David's supply of pretexts had at last come to an end, and he even made no effort to collect new ones. He had never been good at pretences, and had broken with them definitely now, having arrived at telling himself plainly that if he went to Forest Place it was simply because he could not stay away. On the subject of the peril alone he still continued to cherish illusions. That there would have to be a fearful wrench some day, some fierce battle with himself, he knew quite well, yet in the blindness of the passion to which the boyish devotion of four years ago had turned he pleaded with himself for delay, telling himself that there was yet time enough to do what must be done, and in so doing he acted like a madman; for to put off the inevitable struggle is the same as saying: "The lion cub is hard to tame, but I will wait till he is full grown and strong and bloodthirsty, and then I will tear him back from his prey; the rivulet is troublesome to turn, but I will sit still until it is a torrent, and then I will stem it with my hands." O foolish, foolish man! And if the lion turn on you and rend you? And if the stream overwhelm you with its waters?

But David's thoughts did not go so far. So long as the danger was to himself alone he told himself that it need not count, since he felt certain of being able to conquer himself at the given moment, and he had not at this time recognised that there could be danger to her in those semi-confidential talks that began to mark their intercourse. These oases of quiet conversation were to him like single green spots in the empty desert of his life.

Very early he had discovered that there was a bottom of seriousness in her outwardly so thoughtless nature, and that this apparently so gay and so brilliant woman of society was in reality tormented by unsatisfied cravings, and sickened by her surroundings. Nothing is so true as that early impressions are the vital ones for life. The society of winds and waves and the creatures of the sea had given to this soul a certain stamp of genuineness which no after touch could ever efface. On the shore of St. Mallan's, for hours face to face with Nature, Jessie had imbibed a love of truth that was almost passionate in its intensity, a habit of thinking out things for herself which she could not lose even in London drawing-rooms.

"You were saying the other day that the reason I can't get on with the people here is that they are a sham and I am not," she remarked to David, still early in their acquaintance. "But that does not fit either, for I *can* be a sham on occasions too! That is to say, I can pretend to agree with people when I see that the case is quite hopeless. I couldn't at first, but I'm learning the trick. There is a sort of person to whom I never pay the compliment of a reasonable opposition, as dear Miss Austin says. It's partly laziness, I suppose, and partly pride. Do you know what I mean? One doesn't want to expose one's real self where one knows one will be misunderstood, and possibly thought a little cracked. So I just agree to everything, even to life being impossible out of London for ten months of the year. You see, if one once begins to enter into arguments one gets led on much further than one intended, and there is no

time for arguments at parties. If I ever do, I generally remark to myself afterward: 'Good Lord, my dear, how *could* you make such a fool of yourself!' and the next time agree more unctuously than ever. I wonder if you understand what I mean?"

"I think I do," said David, with a joyful upleaping of the heart. Did she ever speak to Sir Augustus in this way, he wondered?

"But it's demoralising, all the same, and makes one feel so base and cowardly. It's the London atmosphere, I suppose, that's corrupting me. Perhaps I shall even get to like shams in time. It would be an advantage, I suppose, since one has to live among them. I've always been told that one ought to melt into one's surroundings."

"You will never melt into your surroundings," said David, almost vehemently. "It is better even to be genuinely unhappy than falsely happy, as one sees so many others."

"But I did not say I was unhappy," began Jessie.

"Of course not; but if ever you are unhappy it will be real unhappiness, as real as the mock happiness of modern society couples—or do you suppose that more than ten per cent of all the conjugal bliss you see around you in satin and diamonds and evening coats and wreathed smiles is otherwise than sham, too, as transparent a sham as all the rest; or that more than half of those united couples aren't profoundly thankful for the absence of the other half?"

"No; a great deal of that is sham, too," said Jessie, slowly.

There were more words on David's lips, but he caught his breath and crushed them back. He saw that Jessie was surprised, and he himself was surprised at himself for having blundered into the conjugal theme, quite instinctively, as it were.

And what wonder, since it was the thought which at present filled his waking and sleeping hours? The mutual relations of Sir Augustus and his wife were a point on which he could never tire of pondering, although from the first he had, in reality, been quite clear on the subject. Having seen them together only once, he knew that Sir Augustus loved his wife, as certainly as that he was not loved by her, and this conviction served to draw the sting of the jealousy within him, and to substitute for it something like pity for the rival whom he could not consider successful, even though the beloved woman bore his name—the compassionate consideration of the strong and true-minded man for a fellow-creature whom at the first glance he had estimated as standing so much lower than himself, both physically and mentally. All this helped him not to hate Sir Augustus, as he would have hated most other men in his place, and even though awake to the fact that Jessie's husband had never got beyond the most formal courtesy of manner, and was watching him with a curious sort of eager, yet nervous suspicion, and always at a distance.

Thus the summer weeks flew past, apparently altering little about the attitude of these three people whose threads of life were beginning to get entangled, yet all the time, and in the midst of the London whirlpool, slowly drawing together Jessie and her countryman. The interest she felt in him

was growing more personal, without her knowing it, and sometimes led her to put questions which he found it difficult to answer.

"Were you long in Australia?" she asked him once, when he had casually referred to his stay there.

"Three years."

"That's a funny sort of time to stay—too long and too short. Either one goes for a mere trip, or one spends half one's life there—that's the usual way. And what did you fill up your three years with?"

"Farming."

"And you had enough of it after that time?"

"I had enough of it before I began. I didn't go to the Colonies because I liked it; they never were more to me than a stepping-stone."

"A stepping-stone to what?"

"To happiness," said David, looking straight past her at the wall.

"Ah, and you got that, I hope?" murmured Jessie, with some wonder and more interest.

"No, I did not get it, because I slipped on the stone and cut myself, instead of grasping the prize. Don't condole, please, it's a thing that happens to a lot of people."

Jessie did not condole, but her interest in Mr. Ellis as a man whom she vaguely understood to have suffered some disappointment, was increased by another degree.

And yet no suspicion of his secret had yet come to disturb her peace, or force her more closely to analyse her growing sympathy for the man. She was aware only of a congenial spirit, mingled with

a certain flavouring of admiration to which she had got used by this time and frankly accepted as a matter of course; and therefore without afterthought she abandoned herself to this new-found pleasure, in complete disregard of her husband's chronic though wordless jealousy, to which she had got as hardened as to the admiration.

But the day of enlightenment could not tarry for ever. Great though were his powers of self-control David could not for ever keep guard upon his eyes and tongue for fear of even a glance or even a word of betrayal escaping him. Being only a man, though undoubtedly a strong one, the moment came for him to slip, as it comes to every one. At first, knowing his own danger, it had been comparatively easy, but as the days passed and the danger did not seem to be coming nearer, the innate contradiction of human nature made him feel vexation instead of relief. Already her frank friendship was becoming hard to bear; already it seemed to him the height of injustice that she should be so serenely unaware of the tortures he was daily enduring in her presence. In one breath he would tell himself that she must never guess the truth and that it was absurd her having not yet guessed it. She should never know—of course not, and on the day after he had told himself this she knew—through his foolishness, more than through his fault.

They had met in a ballroom this time, and this time almost against his will. Until now, and since their first meeting in his aunt's house he had avoided coming together with her in society. To a man with impressionable senses a ballroom is generally

a more dangerous place than an ordinary drawing-room, and David, knowing his own susceptibility to music and lights and flowers, and vaguely alarmed at once more seeing Lady Alington in evening dress, had carefully gone out of the way of anything that might prove a heightening of temptation. It was Jessie herself who unwittingly insisted on his treading the slippery path.

"I shall see you at the Beltons to-morrow?" had been her parting words at the end of his visit. And when he proceeded to coin excuses she only laughed in his face and told him to mind and be in time for the Lancers, as she meant to dance them with him. At that moment David felt that her unconsciousness was almost impossible to bear, and when, with a glance of almost childish entreaty, she added: "*You will* come, will you not?" he ground his teeth and said roughly: "*Yes, I will* come, but it's your doing and not mine,"—a remark which puzzled her at the moment, but which she soon came completely to understand.

Somewhere about the middle of the evening David found himself sitting with Lady Alington in a niche of greenery, with the waltzing couples passing and repassing before them, and yet conveniently screened from too inquisitive eyes by palms and waxen-blossomed shrubs. How they had found their way there he could not exactly have said. From the moment that he had met Lady Alington under the brilliant lights, triumphantly beautiful in pink satin and pearls, all other realities seemed to have retreated from him, leaving him alone with her in the heart of a vaguely seen crowd and suffused by the phantomlike sensation of a happiness

that will not bear analysis, and which yet is far more blissful than anything felt outside of a dream. By this time his soul was so deeply steeped in music and perfume, his spirit so bewildered by the light of her eyes and the dazzling curve of her wonderful shoulders, that he did not feel as able as usual to answer for himself.

"There is Mr. Merrington dancing with his wife," said Jessie, having recovered breath after their last turn. "Do you know, we were wrong after all when we agreed that modern marriages are necessarily shams. That is quite a fashionable couple, and yet no medieval elopement could be more romantic. He fell in love with her at first sight they say, and served for her seven years, or very nearly so—like Jacob for Rachel—for he hadn't a penny, and her father was hard-hearted. And now they've been married for two years, and they're dancing together. Isn't that a regular confirmation of our rash judgment?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" asked David, abruptly.

"I? Well, let me see. I'm not sure yet whether I believe in it in any shape; but if at all, then why not at first sight? They say it's an arrow, don't they? and an arrow either hits or doesn't hit; and *if* it hits—why, there you are! Do *you* believe in the arrow, Mr. Ellis?"

"I have to, since it hit me, and at the very first shot, too!"

He was half turned on his chair toward her, with his arm hanging over the back, and he was half laughing as he spoke. Her vicinity amongst this festive atmosphere had so mounted to his head

as to produce a sort of reckless gaiety which knew quite well that it would not outlive the night, but which yet meant to have its fling while it might.

"This is becoming interesting," said Jessie, laughing, too. "You must tell me more. When did it happen?"

"Four years ago."

"That was just the time you were staying at Craigie Towers, was it not?"

"Yes, it was then."

"Then it must have been your cousin?"

"No, it was not my cousin."

"Somebody staying in the house?"

"There was nobody staying in the house."

"You can't have fallen in love with a fisherman's daughter, surely?"

"Why not, if she was beautiful enough? I'm a furious radical, you know. But she wasn't a fisherman's daughter, though she certainly belonged to the water. She was a mermaid, fresh from the waves, but without a fish's tail, of course."

Jessie looked at her companion in a mixture of amusement and perplexity. She had never seen him in this mood before; generally he was not good at jokes. His eyes were shining strangely. What could be the matter with him?

"And she wouldn't have you?" she asked, still laughing.

"She never even guessed that I meant to have her; for, being by nature a fool, I went off without breathing a word, and expecting her to sit on her rock and wait for me until I had made money enough to claim her. My history has some resemblance, you see, with that of Mr. What's-his-

name?—for I too served my seven years or so, but when I came back at the end for my reward there was none—that's where the difference comes in. My sea-nymph had become a London lady, and I was left gaping."

"And it was in Australia you served your seven years?" she asked, eyeing him curiously.

"Have you only found that out now?" he said, inwardly writhing at the lightness of her tone, yet keeping the smile of false gaiety intact upon his lips; "and have you found out nothing else? This isn't feminine perspicacity, Lady Alington—or is it only feminine deceit? You know as well as I do, don't you, that it was you who sent me out to Australia, as certainly as if you had ordered me to go, and with my head choke-full of mad ideas and madder hopes. Why shouldn't I talk of it, since it's all past history? Boys *will* be foolish, you know."

"Dear me, how very flattering!" said Jessie, entering into what she considered to be the spirit of the joke. "So *I* was the mermaid, was I? Why didn't you tell me so before? Compliments are always acceptable you know—only you might have chosen a more likely one. As far as I recollect, I must have looked particularly fascinating that afternoon on the rocks, with my oldest skirt on, and all slabbered over with seaweed too. Really, Mr. Ellis, I've never known you in such excellent spirits before."

She looked up at him from behind her handkerchief, still choking with laughter, and, meeting his glance, became suddenly sobered. The tone in which he had spoken was quite the right one for a rather audacious pleasantry, but the look

in the eyes somehow did not match it. Meeting it, there shot through her mind the bare possibility of this thing being *true*. And then?

A shiver of alarm was the first sensation she was aware of, though she could not have said what it was that alarmed her. But *could* it be true?

"I'm glad you think me so pleasant a companion," Mr. Ellis was saying, still in the same tone. "There is no *rôle* I think more ungrateful than that of the skeleton at the feast, and you'll acquit me of having played that part to-night, won't you?"

And to himself he was saying, with almost cruel satisfaction—

"Have I done it at last? Have I startled her out of her deuced unconsciousness?"

CHAPTER VIII.

NEXT day Lady Alington paid a visit to Miss M'Farrel. As a rule their intercourse languished; but, thinking over that curious episode during the dance last night, Monica had come into Jessie's head as the person most likely to know something of the real state of the case, and being accustomed to act upon her impulses, she was in Park Street before luncheon.

Miss M'Farrel was fortunately alone, so that Jessie, never good at beating about a bush, was able to go pretty straight to the point. She was provoked with herself for having slept badly and dreamed of nothing but seaweed and rocks, and, attributing these symptoms to unsatisfied curiosity, considered that the sooner it was appeased the better for her peace of mind.

"By the bye," she began, before the necessary commonplaces had been well got through; "you see a good deal of your cousin, don't you?"

"Not as much as we used to," said Monica, bending a little further over her work. "London has a way of keeping relations apart, just as it brings strangers together."

It struck neither of them as odd that by "cousin" both should immediately understand

David Ellis, though in reality Monica possessed quite a tribe of these relations.

"Isn't he rather an eccentric sort of person? I mean, doesn't he do strange and unexpected sorts of things, like, for instance, going off to Australia against the will of his family—it *was* against their will, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I believe his father wasn't very pleased at his resolution."

"Have you any idea why he took it? Don't think me horribly inquisitive, please, but your cousin has become a visitor at our house, and I have got quite to like him, and it just came into my head to wonder what made him go to Australia and what made him come back again."

Jessie was speaking rather confusedly, but Monica was too busy guarding her own manner to be aware of anything peculiar in that of her visitor.

"David never told me," she said, very low.

"And you never guessed?"

"I guessed only this much, that at that time—it was four years ago—something or other happened which made him change all his plans. He was to have gone into the army, then, you know, or probably you don't know, and then quite unexpectedly he found out that he wanted to make a fortune—after never having taken the smallest interest in money—and so he took a very good chance over the water that was offered to him."

"And what sort of thing could possibly have happened to him? Nothing unpleasant, I hope; he is such a really nice young man that I do hope he didn't get into any uncomfortable entanglement, for instance," said Jessie, with a matron-like air of

concern with which any one not in Monica's position could not have failed to be delighted.

"It seems to me that only one sort of thing can have happened to him," she said, making a resolute effort at lightness. "He must have seen somebody whom he hoped to marry, and couldn't marry without fortune. That generally is the reason why young men want to make money."

"Well, and he made it, didn't he?"

"Yes, to a certain extent."

"Then why didn't he marry her?"

"Ah, as for that, I cannot say. I can guess—mind you, only guess—why he went to Australia, but why he came back again, I mean for good, and without—anything happening, that I have not been able to guess, though I have tried."

Though a little surprised at herself for having said as much as this, Monica, instead of wishing her words back, felt pushed to say more. To put into speech the thoughts which she had carried about with her so long afforded so strange and new a relief that it even kept her from analysing the cause of the questioner's interest in the subject. Before the other had spoken again she had said, on some irresistible impulse:

"I can't help fancying that he has had some great disappointment. He is not the same man he was before he went out."

"Perhaps she had married some one else," suggested Jessie, tentatively.

"That is impossible, surely," said Monica, with sudden indignation, raising her smooth golden head from her work with a lightning-like movement. "She couldn't have been so base as to de-

sert him after having gained his love. A man like David is not found every day."

"Good gracious, she is in love with him herself!" reflected Jessie, as she gazed at the delicately flushed face and flashing blue eyes—and on the instant, though she knew it not, David went up several degrees in her estimation.

"But if she knew nothing about it," she remarked, half aloud.

"I like better to think that she was dead," said Monica, not having heard, "and his heart was too sore about it to let him speak, even to his father. David always kept his troubles to himself."


"Yes, she is dead, she certainly is dead," said Jessie, with a curious air of conviction. "This time you have guessed right, I think." And she began to talk of other things, and presently went away with a sensation of having discovered something which would probably change her whole life, whether she wanted it or no.

So what he had said last night was not a joke, after all! It had been a reality. Jessie never was slow at coming to conclusions, and it scarcely wanted the putting together of all sorts of lightly made observations and forgotten trifles to convince her of the truth of the situation. Even in the memory of that first day at St. Mallan's, and in the silences and glances of the man as he had been then, and which closer acquaintance had taught her to read, she found corroboration of the astonishing fact. It was like a flood of light let suddenly into dark places, so bright that she did not at once dare to look. So it was true, after all, what people said about love, what poets wrote about it—the feeling

was a real thing since it could be the father of deeds and not merely words. In face of this so overwhelming proof she was forced to bow her head and believe. The thought of having been loved for years by this man to whose existence she had never given a serious thought, of having been his star of hope, the motive power of his actions—and all this must be so if the first surmise were correct—was a thought filled almost with terror. To imagine all the hopes of which she had been the centre and the bitter disappointment to which she had given rise unwittingly, was to be deeply moved by some feeling which she supposed to be pity, though the pain of compassion was mixed with some new warmth of contentment, streaming suddenly through her whole being—flattered vanity, presumably. It did not happen to every woman, certainly, to be loved like this.

So much for the past. And the present? He had said only that he *had* loved her, and though he had not said that he loved her still, she had already understood. She was no longer the inexperienced girl of two years ago. If she had been long in understanding it was only because her thoughts had not been turned that way. Her eyes once opened, nothing could escape them.

What she saw did not please her entirely. Knowing what she knew now, was it right to let Mr. Ellis see her as often as hitherto? But again, would it not be cruel to deprive the poor man of the one consolation left him, especially as she felt quite certain of his honour, and why should she, who had done no harm consciously, be robbed of the friend to whom she could talk openly? Of



course if she were ever to notice anything in the least approaching to—undue warmth, she would have to forbid him the house, but meanwhile——

Meanwhile Jessie fell to wondering what would have happened if she had still been at St. Mallan's when Mr. Ellis came home from Australia last November, as she probably would have been if Sir Augustus had happened to upset his bicycle at any other point of Scotland—and presently roused herself with the uneasy feeling that it would be better not to pursue this train of thought. Of course the fiction of that joke of the other night having been just a joke and nothing more must be kept up at any price, and Mr. Ellis evidently was of the same opinion on this point, as Jessie observed at their next meeting, although, to her dismay, she also observed that she had lost her friend of the last weeks with whom she had so many pleasant talks, and found—what? It was more than she could say as yet. She knew only that she had asked too much of herself when she had expected herself to talk lightly to the man who for years had toiled for her sake and been disappointed of his reward. She might affect ignorance in words, but the very softening of her usually so brilliant glance as it turned toward him, the very tone of her voice—that instinctively subdued tone which is used toward a sufferer—betrayed that she knew of his sacrifice and appreciated it at its true worth.

She thought she watched herself very carefully, but there was somebody who watched her more carefully still, as at moments she was vaguely aware, when she met Sir Augustus's one black eye keenly fixed on her face or closely following the movements

of the visitor. But she had grown too used to disregard these symptoms to be aware that her husband's chronic jealousy was showing signs of becoming acute.

And again the weeks began to pass, and nothing seemed to be changed since the Belton's dance, and yet everything was different. Gaily they slipped by, among glittering sights and festive sounds, intent, it would seem, on play alone, and yet doing their work surely and not by any means slowly, for in Jessie no revolution ever was slow when once the roots of her nature were struck. But for the discovery made on that June night between the palm-trees and the tree-ferns, her liking for David Ellis might never have developed into anything else; but the knowledge of his love had come like the spring sun to fertilise the germ which the past weeks had sown in her heart, like the match put to the train which had been laid ready to be fired by some hand or other, before even he had become her friend. There was about the situation a certain dash of romance, which, to a fancy as inflammable as Jessie's, was wellnigh irresistible. Though guilty of no conscious weakness, there had really been no chance for her all along. Given her peculiar nature and the circumstances of the case, it was almost impossible that she should not have loved him, even had he been less worthy of her love than in truth he was. She might turn from the contemplation of possibilities or not—in point of fact the harm had already been done in the moment that the conviction of his love had been borne in upon her. She was used to feel not only strongly but rapidly, which came from the vehemence with

which her imagination was apt to throw itself upon one idea at a time and not to let it go. It was in this abnormal vividness of imagination, in fact, that the key to at least one side of her nature was to be found. David had often been struck with the self-revelations on this point which occasionally escaped her. A certain talk which they had one grey July morning under the weary-looking horse-chestnuts of the Park, and having Rotten Row almost entirely to themselves, remained in his memory for long after, and came, in later days, to bear a significance of its own. Jessie had learnt to ride since her marriage only, but she had been an apt pupil and, however late she had been up the night before, seldom missed her morning canter in the Park. This was one of those exercises which her vigorous nature demanded, one of the things that helped to keep her in bodily and mental health. But Sir Augustus did not ride, or rather had ridden with too eminent a peril to his limbs for the exercise to be kept up; and if Jessie was accompanied by any one, it was by an acquaintance, and the acquaintance had lately been David.

"That is good," said Jessie, at the end of an ideal gallop. "This is the way I like the Row. The only drawback was that silly poodle in the middle of the way, staring as though he were moon-struck or hypnotised. I thought you would ride him down. Why can't people leave their dogs at home?"

"You are no friend of dogs, I think?"

"On the contrary; I think that dogs come immediately after people, sometimes before them even."

"Then it is strange that you don't keep a single dog."

"No, it isn't. I don't keep dogs because I'm too fond of them. Do you understand that?"

"Not quite."

"I'll put it differently. I don't keep dogs because I once kept one."

"And?"

"And something happened to it, something so dreadful that I can't bear to think of it, even now."

"Then let us talk of something else."

"But I can't; it's got back into my mind. He was a collie, not a very beautiful collie, I am told, for his nose was pink instead of black, and his paws were too large, but he had such engaging manners and such an insinuating expression that I could look at no other dog beside him. He was called Guy Mannering, and he loved me as much as I loved him, which is saying a good deal, I assure you. We were never apart, and he used to chase the sea-gulls over the rocks and run after the crabs when the tide went out, and get his poor, foolish, pink nose pinched for his pains. One day we walked inland for a change, and a runaway cart came down the steepest bit, just outside the town, and Guy Mannering was hunting a field-mouse and didn't see, and then—I don't know how to say it—I tried to rush forward, but the cart was close already. I only heard a sharp yelp and a slow sort of crunching sound, and when the cart had passed there was something black half smothered in the white dust, and something thin and red like a thread running from it, and caking the dust into brownish pieces. The wheel had gone over his

ribs—it was them I had heard crunching. He was almost broken in two, and yet he still managed to find me with his eyes, just before the light went out of them. I hope it wasn't wrong, but at that moment I prayed that I might die too; when Guy turned up his eyes to my face I felt as though the pity must kill me."

Looking at her, David saw, to his astonishment, that she had grown quite pale and that her eyes were shining with tears.

"You should not take a mere memory to heart so," he said, half rebukingly.

"I know I shouldn't, but I do; I'm made like that, you see. I've never been able to get rid of that look of old Guy's, and I've never been able to keep another dog since. I still see that red line trickling, and the dirty brown cakes which it made of the dust. Even now it makes me sick at times," and she shuddered quickly, closing her eyes. "It is foolish, of course, but I sometimes think there is something wrong with my constitution; I seem to feel things differently from other people, to be gladder and sorrier than they are—things seem to go so deep, to hit me so hard somehow, whether for good or bad."

"Or perhaps it is only that you have less self-control," he observed, thoughtfully, "that you let yourself go too entirely to your emotions. There is such a thing as revelling in painful sensations, you know; but you should not do this," and he looked at her with real anxiety in his dark eyes. "There is something nervous in such fancies as this. Promise me that you will not dwell on them unnecessarily."

"I will try," said Jessie, turning away her face. "I have tried before, but I have not succeeded very well. Papa used to tell me to try, but it was not much good."

"But it is I who tell you now," he said, with sudden warmth. "You will remember what I say, will you not?"

"I will remember," said Jessie, with her face still turned from him.

When she got back home and to her room she first looked about her with startled eyes, and then knelt down in the middle of the floor in her riding-habit, and, hiding her face in her hands, began to murmur something half aloud. She knew now that she loved David Ellis—perhaps even as well as he loved her—and was praying wildly for help to be true to her duties. To hear his words of authority, almost of command, had been too sweet for her not to have found out her heart at last. She knew herself too well, and her instinctive rebellion to anything that approached restraint, not to know what it meant when, instead of rebelling, her spirit thrilled and leapt high with delight at the sound of an admonishing word.

CHAPTER IX.

It would have been hard to disentangle the precise train of thought which made Jessie, on rising from her knees, and without taking time to change her dress, go straight in search of her husband. Some dark instinct—the alarm of an honourable woman who means to remain honourable—led her to the man towards whom she was beginning to feel vaguely guilty. She had remembered suddenly that he loved her, perhaps as well as David loved her, and that lately she had paid him very little attention. She wanted to look at him again, as it were, to see whether she could not discover about him anything more attractive than she had hitherto noted, and whether there was no possibility of getting up at least a real liking for him, or of reviving the more sympathetic feelings she had entertained towards him before he had begun to try her temper with his protestations.

Perhaps it would have been better if she had not gone. Sir Augustus was still employed in his dressing-room, where he was seldom seen to advantage. His narrow-shouldered figure required the sit of a well-cut coat to give it any importance, his shiny black hair was of the sort which is only bearable when its lankiness is got carefully into

place, and his petty-looking arms were never created to adorn shirt-sleeves. Besides, he usually cut himself in shaving, and he had done so again to-day, as the bit of sticking-plaster on his left cheek told Jessie even before she had well closed the door.

Sir Augustus was a good deal astonished at this unwonted intrusion. In the very first instant his eye had lit up with what looked like delight, but almost immediately a cloud had chased away the light—a cloud which had been there often lately. From across the room he looked at his wife with a very fair show of coldness.

"Are you back from your ride already?" he asked, with elaborate indifference.

"Yes; just five minutes ago. I had a real good gallop to-day. Do you know, Augustus," she went on, with a tiny touch of most unusual hesitation in voice and manner, "I have been thinking that really you ought to take to riding again. I am sure it would do you good."

She had perched herself on the arm of an easy-chair, and was playing a little nervously with the hat which she had pulled off.

"I am no rider," said Sir Augustus, quickly, with a slight flush.

"But you might become one—at least as much as to take a quiet morning ride. Stella is so safe, you could take her and I would take one of the others. Even an old lady could ride Stella with her eyes shut."

Sir Augustus glanced sharply at his wife, as though to see whether he was being laughed at; but Jessie's face was unmistakably serious, even earnest.

"What would be the object of my resuming horse exercise?" he inquired, speaking with that ceremonious primness which Jessie had remarked in him even before their engagement, and which always reappeared when his vanity was on the *qui vive*.

"The object would be to accompany me in the Row, of course," she answered, a trifle impatiently. Why was he making her task so difficult for her?

From out of the corner of his eye Sir Augustus looked at his wife. Her uncovered warmly tinted hair, the perfectly fitting habit, the carelessness of the attitude, combined to make her look more than usually beautiful. The poor man set his teeth as he turned back to the glass.

"You surely are not in want of people to accompany you," he said, with a spite that was born of pain alone, and the razor shook in his hand from the force of his inward agitation. "You were not alone to-day, for want of me, were you?"

"No, Mr. Ellis was with me," said Jessie, bravely, for she had been prepared for this. "But I would rather he had not been—I mean it would be more—more natural if you went out with me."

She all but choked over the last words. Sir Augustus did not speak at once, his back was turned and the light was so distributed that she could not see his face in the glass. All she saw was the back of his narrow head and two puny elbows working in the air, and as she contemplated them some new discouragement settled on her spirit. She wished that after all she had chosen some other moment and other surroundings for the effort she was making.

"I don't know what you mean by more natural," said Sir Augustus, at last, with a certain childish petulance of tone; "but I certainly don't mean to begin riding again this season, so if you continue your morning rides you will just have to be content with—other escorts."

He had wanted to say "with Mr. Ellis," but had not quite the courage for so open an implication. There was, however, about his words the effort at a sneer which this time did not escape Jessie, and which instantly transformed her attitude.

"Very well," she said, rising from her seat and gathering her habit into one hand, "it shall be as you like." And she left the room with her head higher than usual, but with the desperate feeling in her heart that her poor, little experiment had most lamentably failed.

She had not quite closed the door when Sir Augustus, flinging down the razor, sank into the chair she had just left and stared helplessly at the wall opposite, quite regardless of the blooddrops that were trickling slowly on to his clean shirt. He had cut himself for the second time to-day.

Jessie made no further advances to her husband. The unexpected repulse had been enough to rouse her independent spirit. She was to have no help in that direction—so much the worse—she would just have to manage without assistance, and she thought she could do it.

It was a terrible time of enlightenment to the passionate, high-spirited woman, for it was now only that she completely understood what earlier she had only guessed at. At last she knew exactly what she had done when she had married Sir Au-

gustus—could even explain to herself why she had burst into those irresistible tears that day last August when he had awakened her with a kiss—at last she had sounded the very depths of her own humiliation. It was from Love that she had learnt those lessons and others as well. Yes, this was the man for whom she ought to have waited, for whom she ought to have kept her kisses and caresses, instead of throwing herself into the arms of the first suitor who bade fair to deliver her from the monotony of her home life. Between these two men who both loved her, she felt herself to be in a peculiarly painful position, she felt guilty towards both—having done both a wrong: to the one because she had disappointed his love, to the other because she had married him without loving him. This consciousness lent to her manner towards both a certain resemblance—something subdued and apologetic towards David—towards Sir Augustus (the anger at her repulse having evaporated) a return of that compassionate mildness which had marked the very beginning of her intercourse with him. She was well aware of the situation being strained, but matters would soon be simplified by her departure from London. In a few weeks more the end of the season would separate her quite naturally from David. There was no reason that she could see, or none that she would allow herself to see, for forcing on a more sensational parting. She, too, like David, thought she was quite sure of herself. It was enough to have given up the morning rides and to avoid as much as possible receiving Mr. Ellis when she was alone. Surely this was all that the sternest duty could demand of her. Conscious

of the purity of their intentions, neither he nor she felt called upon to renounce the poor pleasure of an occasional meeting.

It required a louder note of warning to show them their danger; and the warning came.

None of the three principal actors concerned could ever forget the tepid July night which inaugurated this new phase in their lives. Even if no particular event had marked it it is probable that they would have often returned to it in memory, as all but the most hopelessly unimaginative return to the few perfect summer nights which they have enjoyed outside of walls.

They were returning from a particularly successful river-party, bowling smoothly along under the motionless trees and beside the whispering Thames. The moon, having made a brief but brilliant appearance, had slipped back behind the horizon, leaving to the stars alone the task of lighting the world, a duty into which they were throwing themselves with a peculiarly fiery ardour. It was one of those nights whose absolute clearness seems to draw away a veil from the deepest heavens, revealing whole fields of glory, usually unsuspected—a night on which even the tiniest star becomes conspicuous. Thickly they strewed the vast transparent vault, some flickering like candles in a draught, some immovable as disks of solid gold, some to be recognised only by their multitude, a golden dust powdering the field of the sky, and with here and there an irregular blank space on which no golden points, not even golden dust appeared—an abyss of fathomless blue, turning the brain giddy with the thought of the unguessed-at

worlds which might or might not be beyond, too far ever to be reached by human ken.

"I could understand a person giving up his whole life in order to find out what there is in that blue hole," said Jessie, suddenly, breaking a long silence.

The night was not one which favoured conversation. The almost tangible peacefulness of the surroundings, lying like a cloak over the sleeping world, had fallen on the party, and, joined to the pleasant fatigue produced by a long day in the open air, had made talking appear distasteful. Jessie's ready tongue had scarcely moved since she took her place. Sir Augustus maintained his habitual silence, and David never had much to say for himself in society. The influence had gained even the fashionably-dressed matron to whom Jessie had offered a place in the carriage, in order to make Mr. Ellis' presence there appear less singular.

"And what could you possibly expect to find there?" asked this lady, positively starting at the unexpected nature of the remark. She herself had just been considering by what means she could out-do the river party of to-day—given by a society rival—and had reached the point of wondering whether it would be allowable to dress up the ladies in some becoming peasant dress—a picturesque costume ought to look ravishing on the banks of the Thames, and ought to fill at least two columns of a society journal—and whether there mightn't be difficulties with the police—when Lady Alington's unexpected remark intervened.

"What *could* you expect to find there?"

"Other worlds," said Jessie, dreamily, "with

other arrangements, and where things are not quite so desperately topsy-turvy as here."

"I don't find anything particularly wrong about this world," Mrs. Brockton was beginning, when the mantle of universal peacefulness was rudely torn by a shout close at hand. Round a sharp bend of the road a party of cyclists noisily appeared, their lanterns glaring suddenly out of the shadows, their somewhat unsteady laughter eloquent of the sequel to a jovially-spent evening. Horses and driver had seemingly—as well as their betters—been under the influence of the insinuating quiet, for being thus abruptly aroused from their dreams, they began by losing their heads. There was a violent wrench, as one of the beasts shied, followed by a clatter of hoofs. Jessie first felt herself thrown violently against her side of the carriage, and then violently back again. She became aware, that despite all her efforts at righting herself, she was falling on to something soft and most pleasantly padded—possibly Mrs. Brockton. In another moment she found herself on her knees on the bank, and saw one of the horses down in the ditch and the other plunging to its feet, and caught the lantern-light on the straining harness. A cold fear came over her.

"David, are you safe?" she called aloud, still on her knees, and groping about with her hands. She had scarcely spoken when she felt her fingers taken.

"I am safe, Jessie; I am here," said David's voice close to her ear, and she knew that she was being helped to her feet, and for a few bewildering and yet blissful seconds stood panting with the ex-

citement of relief, and still clinging to his arm. His hand was upon hers, quite covering it up, and pressing it hard, very hard, perhaps with a sense of warning, for her self-control had momentarily given way. But it came back again even before Sir Augustus had found his legs, or Mrs. Brockton had been fished out of the ditch into which she had rolled.

They had been wonderfully lucky, it now turned out, as they proceeded to count their wounded. Only a little skin rubbed off the coachman's ear, a slight flesh wound in one of the horse's thighs, and the destruction of Mrs. Brockton's new lace dress. Granted that they had to be upset they could scarcely have chosen a more favourable spot than this wide shallow ditch, with its soft mud bottom and its grassy borders. Mrs. Brockton was the only really distressed person.

"You're right, after all, about this world being a topsy-turvy one," she said, ruefully, as she eyed her mud-bespattered skirt by the uncertain lantern-light. "This sort of thing ought never to happen in a well conducted universe."

Jessie made no reply. She had already withdrawn her hand from David's arm, and was hastily putting her own attire into order. While the carriage was being put to rights she stood by silent. It was only when the moment had come for resuming her place that she looked round.

"Will you help me in, Augustus?" she said, rather hurriedly. "Your hand, please."

"I'm afraid I can't," he murmured, apologetically. "There is something wrong with it."

They crowded round him in a moment.

"A badly sprained wrist," David pronounced.

Jessie bit her lip in vexation; her own indifference ought never to have been made so conspicuous. Why hadn't she guessed this before? She might have known that, there being an accident in the air, Sir Augustus would of course manage to injure himself somehow.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked, in a tone to which the very sense of remorse gave a certain sharpness. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"A little," he said, in the patient tone of one accustomed to suffer. It was exactly that tone in which he had always answered Dr. Drummond's questions with regard to his leg, and the sound of it gave a new stab to Jessie's conscience. She got into the carriage much displeased with herself, and did not find her tongue again that evening.

When at the door of her own house David helped her to alight, he was startled to see how white her face looked in the lamplight, and wondered to notice a certain tight-set look about her mouth which he could not remember having ever seen before. The accident had shaken her after all, he told himself, and was on the point of making some inquiry when Jessie, already moving towards the door, turned back suddenly towards him.

"You will be here at tea-time to-morrow, won't you?" she said, quickly.

"Yes," he answered, more startled at her manner than pleased by the invitation, "I will be here."

Before he could speak again she had disappeared into the house.

Upstairs Jessie lay down wearily on her bed,

but not to sleep, only to steel herself for the morrow.

She was suffering cruelly, but she was not tortured by doubts or hesitations, as less vigorous minds are apt to be tortured. The way lay quite plain before her; the thorns on it were quite plain too, but she did not try to deceive herself by pretending that they might be avoided.

When David, anxious and apprehensive, appeared punctually next day, he found Lady Alington alone—which lately had seldom been the case. It was the first time that he had seen her not in her best looks, for she belonged to that brilliant order of women to whom each day and each mood seems more favourable than the last. It was on her colouring that she in great part depended, and to-day the wonderful tints of her complexion seemed to have been washed out by something—surely not by tears?—for the usually so transparently white eyelids were red, as red as though they had stolen their colour from the glowing lips that looked to-day so pinched and sickly. She could scarcely be called beautiful to-day, and yet there was a new pathos about her appearance that made her seem to David infinitely more worthy of being loved than even in her most triumphant moments. It required all his strength to hold himself back from taking her into his arms and kissing both the red lids and the white lips and smoothing away these new folds of care on the childish brow. Instead of which—his strength fortunately sufficing—he did nothing but bow ceremoniously to his hostess and silently take his place on the seat which she indicated to him. It was a seat at one side of a large table, at the other side of

which she was sitting, and in the middle of that table there stood a tall vase with a bunch of field flowers which she had gathered on the yesterday's excursion, and almost serving the purpose of a screen, since from under its drooping grasses he could only see her rounded chin bent over a strip of embroidery, with an occasional glimpse of her profile between corn-flowers and ox-eye daisies. The strip of embroidery also was a new feature; he had not often seen her employed in this way during all the too delicious afternoons spent between these same four walls.

Just at first, and despite these symptoms, he thought that nothing particular was coming, for Lady Alington began by making some ostentatiously conventional remarks on yesterday's excursion and the accident which terminated it, in somewhat absent-minded tones, to be sure, but yet wonderfully steadily. And yet he too knew that something lay in the air, that after last night there must be a change—one way or the other—the only question was in which direction?

As the minutes followed each other, her abstraction seemed to increase, so much that she did not always give the right answer to his remarks.

"Very well, thank you," she said at random in reply to a polite inquiry after Sir Augustus's wrist, though in reality the poor baronet was sitting upstairs with a swollen and bandaged hand. And then, after a rather long pause, she said with quite unusual constraint:

"You have been stationed here for six months, have you not?"

"Yes, for six months," replied David, aston-

ished, for she knew exactly how long he had been here.

"And do you not find a home garrison rather monotonous?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, quickly, trying to see her face beyond the flowers, but there was a large scarlet poppy hanging in the way.

"I mean," said Jessie, throwing off some of the irksome and so uncongenial constraint, and speaking a little faster, "that if I were a man I should never be content to sit in a London barracks with nothing but everyday, unpicturesque people around me when there is such a choice of more interesting stations in all parts of the world."

David did not answer at once. Slowly he turned pale. He had already understood perfectly. So this was the direction in which the question was to be settled. Was she, then, the braver of the two, or was it only that she knew her own weakness better?

During the silence that followed, Jessie stitched away at her work with lightning-like fingers, for the sheer sake of fixing her thoughts. At this moment she was more thankful than she could say for the flowery screen; she did not want to see his face until the first emotion had been weathered.

"And you think I ought to go abroad?" asked David, after that endless silence, in a strangely flat voice.

"I think it would be a pleasant change for you."

Jessie had got herself well in hand now. That gift of dissimulation which the brute instinct of self-protection lends to even the frankest of women, was waking up within her. She spoke with a very

respectable imitation of that merely friendly interest in which the advice was ostentatiously given, clinging the while desperately to her strip of embroidery, as though to a talisman of safety. David managed much worse—perhaps because he had no strip of embroidery to occupy his fingers and his eyes. Under his clumsy masculine hands the thin veil of conventional decency was very nearly torn in two.

“I hadn’t thought of changing,” he hesitatingly said—“but I suppose it could be done—if you like—that is to say, if you consider it better——”

He leaned forward in hopes of catching a glimpse of her face and reading its expression, but she had leaned back at the same moment, and there was a spray of lilac vetch obstructing the view this time.

“I always think it better to see the world when one has a chance—and especially at your age, it is such an advantage.” This was said in the tone of a woman of forty. “And there are such delightful stations—stations with such interesting studies to be made of manners and races—with tropical scenery——”

“And tropical climates,” put in David, speaking in a passing movement of hurt pride.

She looked across in quick alarm; right through the fringe of grasses he had a vision of her startled face.

“Oh, you mustn’t go to any of those fever places,” she said, peremptorily. “But surely there are plenty of healthy stations—Malta, for instance, or *some* parts of India. Nothing tempts me so much as foreign countries.”

"I like my own country best," said David, with a touch of obstinacy; and at that moment he felt that against his will he would not be driven from it. A glance from the other side of the table softened the sudden hardness, filling him both with ecstasy and pity—with ecstasy because it told him again what he had guessed for long and been certain of since last night, and of pity at sight of the struggle going on. It was so distinctly a glance of appeal; she was asking so plainly to be defended against herself that neither wounded pride nor even pain could stand against it.

"You will think over the plan," she was saying, tremulously—but it scarcely wanted her words.

"I do not *need* to think over it," said David, rising as he spoke, and in another, lower tone he added: "Your will shall be done."

She wanted to say "thank you," but could only hold out her hand with a wan smile, for he was standing before her chair. It was now only that the hardest moment came, for it was only now that they could see each other's faces unscreened and undisguised, and seeing them, each was struck with fear. At sight of the worn look that had come so quickly to her upturned face, and aware of the tell-tale, chilly dampness of the hand that lay in his, David felt for one moment that the only possible thing to do was to sink on to his knees before her chair and beg her to pardon him for the suffering of to-day. In time, barely in time, he remembered that he had given his word—that he had said that her will should be done.

It was this thought that took him out of the room, without another word having passed his lips,

and thus saved the precious veil from tearing to pieces.

Outside he leant for a moment against the wall and passed his unsteady hand across his forehead.

"She is right," he said, under his breath; "but I could not have done it alone."

CHAPTER X.

IN the second story of the house in Forest Place there was a room which was called by courtesy the smoking-room, though used solely by Sir Augustus, who did not smoke. It was the sanctuary into which he retreated when the habitual shyness with which he shrank from his fellow-creatures became too acute to be borne, the den to which he carried his many uneasy thoughts, and every new suspicion, to be turned over and over and gnawed like a bone.

It is generally asserted that the stamp borne by an apartment accurately betrays the character of its inhabitant, but exactly the contrary was the case here. To see the well-cleaned guns on the wall and the Turkish pipes on the carved wooden rack, you might infallibly take the inmate to be of a sportsmanlike, not to say warlike nature, with strongly developed, ultra masculine tastes; for besides the guns, there was a very handsome pistol-case on a stand, and various oriental-looking scimitars glittering against the costly hangings of the wall, while the choice of both winged and four-footed creatures mounted in the most life-like attitudes and perched on every available ledge and shelf, seemed to speak of endless, ardent chases under all sorts of conditions and in all sorts of climates.

Misleading, alas, entirely misleading! The guns were the guns which Sir Augustus had never learned how to handle—the identical one with which he had shot out his eye figured among them—and the pipes were the pipes which it had made him sick to smoke, and which yet he had preserved as carefully as relics. The whole room was full of relics—the relics of what had once been hopes. Even the very bicycle which had spilled him at Dr. Drummond's door, so to say, and which he had never mounted since, had its place in a corner.

Although the most upright of men, poor Sir Augustus, who never in his life had succeeded in hurting anything but himself, had turned his room into a living lie, and was even conscious of deriving pleasure from its very falseness, exactly because he knew himself debarred both by weakness of constitution and by the curse of awkwardness from all those pursuits which seem to come naturally to an Englishman. A certain half-childish hankering led him to surround himself with all the insignia which he saw in the rooms of luckier men. The desire to deceive was not in his thoughts. It was not the hope of being taken for a mighty Nimrod by the occasional visitors who entered the sanctuary, which caused him to buy up every new specimen of artistically mounted eagles that met his eye in a West End shop. The visitors were so rare that they would not have been worth plotting for, and even when one of them did appear, Sir Augustus's ingrained honesty of soul made him feel much more ashamed than proud of these trophies. It was his private satisfaction alone that he consulted. In some dim, illogical way it flattered his constitu-

tional vanity to sit among these warlike weapons and dream himself the master, as well as the possessor of them all, and to soothe the consciousness which existed deep down in his soul right under the mass of self-doubt and even contempt, and which told him that despite his unsteady nerves and unsteadier fingers, he was a man at least in one thing, and that if it was only a question of getting oneself killed—a thing which he had come near doing so many times as to be able to speak with authority—he would be able to measure himself with any person of his acquaintance. The thought was a comfort, though not a consolation. By a queer contradictoryness of nature, this man, who could not hold a gun as it should be held, had been cursed with a real liking for the very pursuits from which he was debarred. In that frail, insignificant-looking body there lived a sportsman's spirit, hampered only by the outward personality and by the incurable want of self-confidence.

In the smoking-room it was that Sir Augustus had latterly spent more and more of his time, even those hours which had been formerly given to his club. Those excursions had always cost a certain effort. It was so painful to feel the eyes of his acquaintances upon him—and he had nothing but acquaintances, being too shy and too sensitive ever to have possessed a friend—perhaps trying to read his expression, so overwhelming to be clapped on the shoulder and publicly offered a penny for his thoughts. Besides the very streets had their inconveniences to a man who felt inwardly convinced that every person who jostled him was observing his black bandage, and that every street boy knew

of his having shot out his own missing eye. Here among his beloved gun-barrels and scimitars he could let his face go, without any fear of the stuffed pelicans and herons making remarks on his expression. Outside this room no one now saw his real face, for the poor man's self-control had been growing apace lately. Just at first he had dared to show the standing jealousy that devoured him, but Jessie had cured him of that. In face of her evident irritation, he had soon taught himself to swallow down his fears, and digest their bitterness in secret. In reality the happiness of having gained her, though so great as to nearly turn his not over-strong brain, had been of very brief duration. Despite the bliss of acceptance, her first refusal and the avowal coupled with the very acceptance, had never ceased to rankle. Even then he had told himself that it would be wiser to renounce her, but he had not been able to do so. Having barely recovered from the first raptures of marriage, her words of then came back to his mind, and he began to watch her suspiciously, prepared at every moment for his rival. At sight of David he had instantly feared a danger greater than any his false alarms had yet showed him. Though he was not a clever man, he very soon saw that his wife was not indifferent to this countryman of hers—such observations depend less on brains than on feelings, which with Sir Augustus were as complicated as sensitive. Since making this remark he had been living in a hell of agonised doubts and ever-increasing suspicion, which bade fair to scorch to ashes all the original amiability of his character, to blacken its whiteness, render crooked its straightness, em-

bitter its sweetness, and even to poison the treasures of tenderness which lay hidden unsuspected in this soul. At moments he did not know whether he loved or hated her most, this woman whom he had wooed so diffidently, and who seemed about to put upon him so deep a humiliation. Everything in this self-repressed nature, which repulsed for fear of being repulsed, was intense and passionate, though nothing dared show itself. There were days when he would take from his table Jessie's latest photograph and hurl it into a corner of the room, only to pick it up again, reverently dust it and press it to his lips like the veriest schoolboy lover; and other days on which he would sit and gaze at it with locked doors, until his eye grew dim with tears. If he had been able to love her a little less it is conceivable that he might have had a chance with her; but from the first the marriage had been doomed to failure: too much love on one side, too little on the other, it is always a bad way of settling up accounts. It was in the smoking-room, too, that he would allow himself the harmless satisfaction of writing David Ellis's name on scraps of paper, to be thrown into the empty grate in the company of a lighted match, and there slowly consumed. He had always been too painfully conscious of his own defects to hope for his wife's fidelity, and the more he contemplated his one-eyed face in the mirror framed in antelope horns which hung between the two windows, the less did he hope for it, and now he doubted not that his hour had struck. And yet he found it impossible to resign himself to that which he had always considered inevitable.

Quite lately a new suspicion had given colour to his fears. There was a question which for six days past—that is, since the excursion by the river—he had been wanting to put to his wife, and had not dared to. Jealousy pushed him to speak, while vanity, loth to expose its own wound, kept him silent. Yesterday, while she was binding up his injured hand, as she did daily with mechanical punctuality, he had almost put the question; but she had just then dropped the scissors with which she was cutting the linen strips, and before she had picked them up again his courage had evaporated. She would be coming again to-day at the same hour, but he did not think he would make another attempt.

While he was telling himself this he heard her step on the stairs, and within the same minute she was in the room, holding the linen bandages and scissors in her hands. On each of the last six days she had accomplished this task with conscientious carefulness, but without any return to the more familiar tone which she had used that day in the dressing-room.

“The swelling is going down,” she said, as she undid the old bandage.

Sir Augustus knew that was coming. Every day at this same juncture she had said, “The swelling is going down,” to which he had always unhesitatingly agreed.

There followed the accurate measuring of the strips and settling of the bandage according to the doctor's directions. Her bent head was very close to his face during these minutes, and his was fixed with a sort of painful intentness on one particular

patch of gold which gleamed right in the midst of the very brownest part of her curiously unequal hair. As the perfume of the rich tresses filled his nostrils he felt a fresh access of excitement coming over him. He had not meant to speak, but before he knew what he was doing he had jerked out his question.

"I didn't know that Mr. Ellis had ever been at St. Mallans?"

This was what he said, and had been longing to say all week.

It had been at the very outset of the homeward drive, and before the spell of silence had fallen on the party, that the words had been spoken, which ever since had been working in his mind.

"It is almost as light as a Scotch night," Jessie had said, as she took her place. "Does it not remind you of St. Mallans, Mr. Ellis? I have only got to half shut my eyes to imagine that the river is the sea, though a very calm one, of course."

David had said something in agreement with the proposition, but Sir Augustus had not listened to him; his mind was too much absorbed by the implication contained in the question. So the man had been at St. Mallans? Her acquaintance with him did not date from this season alone? There were other links—perhaps memories—between them, besides the general ones of nationality? The thought had a new terror for him.

By the jerk on the bandages he knew that she had started.

"He has been at St. Mallans," she said, hurriedly, almost deprecatingly; "but not often and not for long."

"But you knew him then?"

Her evident agitation, while terrifying him, gave him the very courage of terror.

"You can scarcely call it knowing. I only saw him for a few minutes—no, hours I mean; for Papa would not let him go after he had brought me home."

"Brought you home from where?"

"From the bay. I was on one of the islands, and the boat got loose, and——"

"And he was the man you told me about who came to your help—your rescuer, as you called him?" asked Sir Augustus, his voice almost failing him for the question.

"Yes, of course. I thought you knew that that was the way our acquaintance began? We are quite old friends, you see," she added, with a desperate effort at lightness.

"Yes, I see."

He thought he saw much more than this. A feeling of hopelessness had come upon him. He had always vaguely suspected that unknown knight-errant who had had the good fortune to do her a service, and under circumstances so very likely to leave an impression on a girlish imagination; it was hard not to grudge him that opportunity. To recognise him in this already so mistrusted man seemed to the husband no less than the sealing of his fate. Now, indeed, there could be no chance for him.

As Jessie, with trembling fingers, fixed the bandages, she was asking herself whether she should not tell him of the prospect of David's departure. Both his manner and his words had made clear to

her his jealous fears; would it not be better to crush them by the news of the impending separation? She had almost spoken, and yet she did not speak. To speak would be to openly avow a situation which until now had not been put into words. Besides, what could she say? Nothing positive, since she did not know of anything being settled. Since his visit on the morrow of the expedition she had had no sign from David. He had said that her will should be done, but there might be difficulties in the way, he might not succeed at once in obtaining an exchange. She would rather wait until the sacrifice was accomplished, and then he would find out for himself.

So with the words unspoken—words that might have altered the whole course of her life—Jessie moved towards the door. She had almost reached it when the sound of her husband's voice arrested her.

“Jessie!”

He spoke with a new, almost querulous sharpness, and she saw the black eye gleaming strangely in the white face.

“Yes?” she said, facing round with sudden defiance, as though to meet an accusation. “Do you want to ask me anything?”

“I only wanted to ask you if you had changed your mind?”

“About what?”

“About what you told me at St. Mallans on the day we got engaged.”

“What did I say then?”

“That you did not believe in—in love, and that sort of thing. You *do* believe in it now, don't you?”

He spoke in nervous haste, as though afraid that his courage might not last out the phrase, and with a sly, almost wicked smile upon his tremulous lips. As Jessie stood opposite to him her cheeks flamed, but she would not allow her gaze to sink. In her inmost soul she shrank with passionate distaste from the commonplace domestic scene which she believed was coming, but even at the risk of provoking it she could not insult herself by speaking a lie at this moment.

"Yes, I *do* believe in love," she said, fearlessly and proudly, looking him full in the face the while. "But only in *honest* love—do you understand me, Augustus?—only in honest love!"

For a moment it seemed as though more must be coming. The dreaded scene appeared imminent—but only for a moment; Sir Augustus's courage was already exhausted. Under her flaming gaze it shrank to nothing. When she said coldly:

"Have you anything more to ask me?" he replied with undignified haste. "Nothing—no, nothing at all."

Without another word she left the room. Her head was held high, but there were tears of mortification shining in her eyes, rendered all the hotter by the injustice of the implied accusation. It was hard to be suspected just in the moment in which the decisive sacrifice was about to be accomplished. So thick and stinging were those tears, that when down-stairs a note was handed to her she could not immediately recognise David's writing. In a few brief lines he was giving her notice of the exchange he had succeeded in obtaining into a regiment sta-

tioned at Malta, and of his immediately impending departure from England, and was asking whether he would be allowed to take leave personally or whether he would have to content himself with a written farewell.

CHAPTER XI.

THE note plainly asked for an answer, but none was given. The only two possible answers were either Yes or No, and Jessie felt equally unable to pronounce either. Her heart yearned for just one more sight of him, while her common-sense told her that it would be safer to go without it. After an interval of painful hesitation she decided to do nothing—that is, to leave it to Fate.

The morrow was a day of troubled expectation. It would have been hard to say whether she more hoped or more feared that David would take the permission not accorded to him in words, and yet not forbidden him. The delight of that last look was shadowed by the dread of losing her carefully-preserved dignity by some momentary access of weakness—of more than that she was not afraid, but even that thought was unbearable to her independent spirit. She wished the moment over, not only because she would rather have the wrench behind her, but in order to be sure that she would be as strong in practice as she felt in theory. It was something of the feeling of the young soldier who has never been in battle, torn by doubts as to his own valour, and longing to precipitate himself into action, even while shrinking irresistibly from

the peril, in order to gain certitude as to what he can do.

But perhaps there would be no battle after all, she said to herself, as the afternoon began to slip past and nobody came except a servant to inquire at what hour her ladyship desired the carriage. Her ladyship did not desire it at all, as she declared, after a moment's hesitation. This negative concession was surely permissible, it could scarcely be called an active interference with Fate.

Another featureless hour passed. The conviction that David had read a refusal in her silence began to gain upon her, filling her with an illogical displeasure. She almost wished now that she had had the courage to say Yes; it seemed a pity that all these valiant resolves of fortitude should be wasted, all this carefully-trained heroism spent on the formal note which would have to be written next day.

She was in her usual reception-room now, moving about restlessly from table to table and from window to window, sitting down often, only to change her position after a minute. Despite its brilliancy the afternoon smelt of thunder. There was no horizon visible from here, but over the house-fronts opposite the sunshine streamed with a peculiar metallic glare, and the hot heavy air lay as motionless as an animal that is crouching for its spring. It was the sort of atmosphere that both excites and oppresses, and its influence mixed a certain languor with the feverish unquiet of Jessie's peregrinations about the room.

She had just returned for the fifth time from a long gaze up the street, and, throwing herself into

her favourite chair, inwardly vowed that she would not go near the window again, when a sharp ring at the bell set all her nerves tingling. She bent her head to listen: there were steps on the stairs, the moment then was come?

With trembling fingers she put a stray lock of hair in its place and rose with desperately set lips and without a vestige of colour in her face to receive—a peculiarly dull couple of her acquaintances—county neighbours on a visit to town; a shadowy-looking husband with an extra-positive wife; he with watery, unreal-looking eyes and undefined whiskers that seemed to fade off into nothing; she, on the contrary, with unmistakably tangible contours, the reddest cheeks and blackest hair imaginable, and a general air of having absorbed in her person all the material as well as the colouring-matter which should have gone to the making-up of the two. Jessie had often laughed at the oddly-assorted couple, and, as she said, would have felt no surprise to see Mr. Millet floating away through the keyhole.

The effect of their appearance at this moment of strained expectation was so great that for several seconds Jessie stood speechless before them, unable to conceal her almost comical consternation. It was only when she met the gaze of four astonished eyes—the two watery grey ones and the two positive black ones—that she remembered that her face was probably not quite suitable to the occasion, and slowly began to recover herself. As the absurdity of the situation dawned upon her she began to laugh—a trifle hysterically, and yet with a certain wild relief, for the wrench was postponed. Al-

most effusively she asked her visitors to sit down, and patiently submitted to the flood of county news which Mrs. Millet had brought to town with her, together with the patterns of ribbon to be matched, and of children's pinafores to be supplemented, while Mr. Millet hovered in the background, content with thinly piping an occasional corroboration of his wife's statements. The county news was not yet exhausted when Jessie gave a second nervous start, for there had been a second ring. Again the blood began to course wildly through her veins and her heart to beat stormily, until a keen glance into the outer room abruptly stilled its agitation. This time it was a stout elderly bachelor, evidently much oppressed by the heat, though—to judge from his close-cropped crown and the texture of his summer garments—having made all possible arrangements to meet it.

"An awful atmosphere, Lady Alington, an awful atmosphere," he panted, wiping his shining forehead, as he succumbed on to a chair. "If the effort could be weighed in the balance this visit ought to fetch the price of two. A truly heroic mark of friendship, eh? Hope you are touched!"

"Deeply touched," said Jessie, smiling at him mechanically, and wondering the while what that perspiring man would say if he could see into her innermost mind and there read her true sentiments regarding the effort which he had chosen this day of all others to make. But was that not another ring? This time it must be——

No, not yet. Only a couple of formal-looking clerical brothers, with stiff, ungainly manners, and a just perceptible spark of real enthusiasm momen-

tarily piercing through the chilliness of their long-backed personalities—workers in the East End, and, despite the formality of their appearance, bits of fanatics in their way, who left their beloved slums only to recruit helpers in the very heart of the enemy's camp.

What maddening fatality was this? Were all these people in a plot against her? Why had she not thought of forbidding her door to every one but the one visitor? She had been prepared for either David or solitude, but not for indifferent faces; for this contingency she had taken no measures. To heighten the irksomeness of the situation the elements present were particularly difficult to fuse—all strangers to each other, and without a single taste in common. The country couple, hopelessly domestic as well as agricultural, talked only of the harvest prospects, with a due seasoning of calves and babies given in about equal proportions—all distant and unknown things to the hot-looking bachelor, who was a Londoner of the Londoners, and cared for nothing but drinking tea in the drawing-rooms of pretty women—particularly in cool weather—while to the two clerical brothers the West End tea-table was almost as unfamiliar as the calves. It was a case in which the whole work devolves on the hostess, as Jessie, usually rather bad at generalities, suddenly woke up to perceive. With an almost convulsive effort she succeeded in rising to the occasion, the very consciousness of her innermost state of mind had frightened her into the attempt. Perhaps after all this was better than walking about between windows and tables. Her tortured nerves themselves gave animation to her

manner and colour to her cheeks, and helped her to work herself up into so good a semblance of interest, that presently, without having heard any preliminary ring, she suddenly became aware that David was in the room. The blood left her face for a moment, only to rush back again at sight of the evident displeasure on his. The presence of these strangers, for which she herself at this moment felt a mixture of fury and thankfulness, was to him obviously and simply distasteful. There was something like haughty surprise in the glance which met hers, and in which she could almost read the words: "Is it thus that we are to see each other for the last time?"

She could only answer with another glance, and a slight shrug, which said plainly: "Not my doing—an unlucky chance;" and turn back again to her duties.

But things would no longer go as they had been going. Her tongue seemed bound and her animation paralysed since the entrance of the last visitor. She began to feel as though she must cry out to them all to be gone, and deliver her from her part in this farce. But, despite the absence of common interests, they all sat on as though in a conspiracy, or as though each had sworn to outstay the other, in order to have the monopoly of his hostess's ear for his own private interests. As the minutes passed Jessie's restlessness increased. She could not see David, who had taken his place in the background, somewhat in her rear, and she had not heard his voice since the first greeting, but she was continually and intensely aware of his presence, and aware, too, of the reproach that lay in his at-

titude and silence. The consciousness of it oppressed her strangely. Every time she heard him move she grew pale with the terror that he might be going—and going in anger—without one farewell word.

Within the last minute the room had been darkening rapidly with the double shadows of the approaching evening and the approaching storm. Jessie's anxiety made her think it even later than it was. Presently it was all she could do to give coherent answers to Mrs. Millet.

"We are going to have rain before night," said this lady for the fourth time. "It is the very thing we want for the onion crop."

"We are certainly going to have rain," agreed Jessie, rousing herself at sight of a new hope. "Are you not afraid of getting wet on your way back to the hotel?"

"I shall be too happy thinking of the onions to mind it," broadly smiled the agricultural matron. "If it wasn't for my new bonnet——"

"It would be a *crime* to spoil that bonnet," said Jessie, decisively, eyeing the floral erection which was as truly agricultural as its wearer, in its profusion of nodding corn-ears. "Shall I have a hansom called?"

"Do you think it is as near as that?" asked the hot man, flattening himself in his chair as well as his proportions would allow him, in order to peer up at the sky. "I had meant to go on to Mrs. Goring from here."

"You will not find her at home, if you don't make haste," said Jessie, quickly. "I know she meant to go out after six."

At last it was over. As the long-backed brothers bowed themselves out with a parting invitation to the slums, and Jessie turned back towards the shadowy room and towards the half-seen figure in the background, she felt suddenly frightened at what she had done. She had her wish, she was alone with him now; but had this better not have been? The first flash of the coming storm—showed her his face, and still with that cloud of displeasure on it. A distant growl of thunder came almost as an echo to his mood. The thing clearest to her was that there must be no silences between them; there were too many thoughts lying in wait to fill them up. Despite the twenty-four hours of preparation she found that she had got nothing ready to say, so she said the first thing that came into her head.

"You have an umbrella, I hope? It will be pouring in ten minutes."

"Yes, I have an umbrella," he answered, almost sulkily, then in the same breath; "was it necessary to have these people here? Could you not have granted me one hour undisturbed?"

"I did not have them. Some chance made them choose to-day."

"To your relief, no doubt. Your trust in me does not seem strong."

"It was not I, it was Fate," said Jessie, wearily.

It was the nearest approach to an acknowledgment of the situation which had yet been made. David had almost spoken again, but got up suddenly and walked to the window, as though to observe the weather.

Despite her terror of the silence, Jessie could not immediately find anything more to say. The situation was so nicely balanced that a word might weigh on the wrong side. She sat quite still in her place, as though afraid that even by moving she might bring about a catastrophe. A second flash of lightning illuminated the tall vase on the table, still filled with the same field-flowers she had brought home from the banks of the Thames. Bleached and withered though they were, she had not yet made up her mind to have them cleared away; even the faded red and blue of these ghastly poppies and corn-flowers seemed to breathe country air in the very heart of the town.

"So your departure is already fixed?" she asked at last, understanding that one of them had to speak.

"It is fixed for to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" she said, quickly, unreasonably alarmed—had she not wanted the wrench over? "Is it raining?" she added, without making a pause, for fear of saying anything else.

"Yes. What reason have I for further delay?"

He had quitted the window and resumed his former seat. Jessie understood that her first question had been answered and not her second, and began to rack her brain for something safe to say. David was not making her task as easy for her as he might; in the very midst of the impending desolation she felt something almost like anger against him. The curtness of his answers seemed to render absurd her wretched little efforts at generalities. The door into the outer drawing-room had been left open by the departing visitors, she noticed it

and was glad of it, without knowing why. The privacy of the interview was undoubtedly modified by that unclosed door.

From minute to minute the silences were becoming more frequent and more oppressive, while the room changed from gloom to the vivid illumination of lightning, and back again to gloom, and the rising storm howled down the street. With hot, unsteady fingers Jessie pulled a grass-head out of the vase beside her and slowly pulled it to pieces. A scent as of new-mown hay rose to her nostrils, and remained for ever after inextricably mingled with the memories of this day. The flowers were not acting as a screen to-day as they had done at the last interview, for neither Jessie nor David was sitting at the same place. These moments were too precious to be lost; each was sitting so as to see the other's face, and each watched the other furtively, as though endeavouring to impress on their memory every detail of feature, as seen by the brief but mercilessly clear flashes.

"The rain has been very much wanted for the crops," said Jessie at last, in order to break a particularly irksome pause, and desperately taking her cue from Mrs. Millet. To her consternation David got up abruptly.

"It is no use," he said, abruptly, "if *you* can talk of the weather *I* can't."

She looked at him with a new alarm, and met a tortured but reassuring smile—the smile of the martyr on the rack.

"I am going," he said, more gently, in a tone that answered all her fears.

She rose and put out her hand, then dropped it

again, as though to delay the wrench for just one minute longer.

"Then it is quite fixed for to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"And to Malta? What is your new regiment?"

"The seventy-first."

She bent her brows in sudden thought. Something she had read in the papers that very morning came back to her mind.

"But is not the seventy-first ordered to India, to take part in——?"

"A mere frontier skirmish," said David, quickly; "but they were in want of men, that's why it could be managed so quickly."

"And you volunteered? Why did you not tell me this in your note?" Even as she asked it she knew the answer and understood all the generosity that lay in his silence. "I never meant you to do anything so—so unnecessary as this!"

"It is I who considered it necessary," he answered, almost coldly.

His tone brought her back to herself. The surprise of this new fear had almost been too much for her, but the danger was over now. It would even be better so, she told herself wildly, caught by the species of nervous exaltation which sometimes helps us over moments like this—the sacrifice would be more complete.

"Good-bye," she said again, and again put out her hand which now burnt with fever heat. There was a mist before her eyes which saved her from seeing his face. Only one minute more and all would be safe; and while she was still thinking this

she staggered and half fell against his quickly outstretched arm. Despite all her courage the news she had just heard had been too much for her overtaxed nerves. For a space of about thirty seconds she lay dizzy and faint, neither quite sensible nor quite insensible, her head almost on his shoulder, while he anxiously peered into her face in true masculine helplessness before these unknown symptoms. Her eyes were half closed, her lips fallen apart; at this moment it seemed almost impossible that he should not touch them in one farewell kiss, of which she would probably never be aware that it had been given. But human strength is almost more wonderful than human weakness. At this supreme juncture of his life it was the greatness of his love itself which came to his aid. At sight of the blue ring under the eyes, of the damp forehead on which the golden hair lay limply, so deep a pity seized him for what she must have suffered, so real a dread of making the moment more difficult to her than it already was, that in face of this compassion every personal desire fell abruptly into the background. To take advantage of this physical weakness would not only be unworthy of him, it would also be cruel to her.

It all passed through his mind during the few seconds that she stood leaning against him; before even he heard an unexpected sound in the direction of the door and saw one of the curtains moving, the battle had been fought and won. That same sound had roused Jessie to full consciousness. She stood upright again, looking at him with dazed eyes, and very pale, but almost self-possessed.

Their last words were exchanged quickly, al-

most quietly. That sound at the door had startled them into the sense of the risk they were running. The height of the situation was passed; nothing could have given them back their self-command more effectually than the fear of a pair of prying servant's eyes.

In the middle of the room Jessie stood upright, listening to his descending steps. She waited through the pause that followed—there was still the closing of the front door to come. It came at last in an unusually loud bang, which in her fancy seemed to prolong itself into an echo, or perhaps had only got merged into a parting clap of the now retreating thunder.

Then she turned back and looked around her, as though in search of something. The sacrifice was accomplished then—the path of duty lay before her now, unencumbered with obstacles. Frightened at the deep sob which escaped her, she rose from the chair on to which she had sunk and looked at the clock. The hour was long past at which she was accustomed to bind up Augustus's hand. The first step in that drearily grey path should be taken at once. In feverish haste she collected the materials and almost ran up the familiar stairs. Just in front of the door of the smoking-room a faint, curiously repulsive smell met her, a smell she knew, and yet could not name, and one she had certainly never met with here. Without giving a thought to it, she opened the door.

The room was much darker than the drawing-room, for Sir Augustus loved heavy hangings, being no lover of the unflattering light, and no candle had yet been lit.

"Are you here, Augustus?" asked Jessie, advancing cautiously.

There was no answer, and a faint flicker of lightning, almost the last of the storm that was drawing rapidly away to the east, showed her her husband's chair empty, while at the same moment her foot struck against something which she could not explain to herself here—something yielding and warm. The smell she had noticed on the landing was far stronger here. Arrested by some sudden nameless dread, she stood still, not daring to move, and trying not to think, waiting for the next flash—her eyes fixed expectantly before her. It was so long in coming that she began to fear that last flash had actually been the last of all. She was wondering whether she had not better call for a light when it came, faint and ghastly, yet clear enough to show her her husband lying dead at her feet with a pistol on the carpet beside him—and immediately she remembered that the smell which had puzzled her was the smell of gunpowder.

CHAPTER XII.

DAVID had turned the corner of the street before he noticed that the water was dripping off his hat brim and drawing shiny strips down the front of his coat. The storm was laid, or rather it had melted away into one of those cool, quiet showers that, coming at the end of an oppressive day and after the clamour of thunder and wind, seem like a reconciliation of heaven with earth. It was refreshing, certainly, but also inconvenient, and instinctively David turned to the natural remedy, that of opening his umbrella, but in the same moment became aware that his hands were empty. In the agitation of his departure he had doubtless left his umbrella in the hall of the Forest Place house.

He turned mechanically and began retracing his steps. As he once more rounded the corner he noticed a footman coming out bareheaded, and also without an umbrella, from one of the doors in this row, and running off in the opposite direction; and even in the midst of his present pre-occupation it struck him as an unusual thing for an English footman to do. In another minute he was quite near the house he was returning to, and recognised that it must have been exactly from here that the footman had started. The door was open, as he noticed on going up the steps—that footman, again,

of course—so much the better, he could fetch his umbrella without having to ring. In the hall he came near to knocking down the small, dumpy butler, whose excess of dignity generally made up amply for his want of inches, but whom some violent emotion had abruptly reduced to what he really was: a flabby and nervous little man with goggling eyes and unsteady legs. In the very act of explaining his errand David stopped short and stared at him in amazement.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked, apprehensively; thinking vaguely of some second and worse attack of the faintness he had been witness of that evening.

“Oh, sir, oh, it’s just horrible!” stammered the great Mr. Belt, as incoherently as though he were a mere ordinary mortal, and turning of a more sickly white as he spoke.

“What is?”

“This misfortune, Lord preserve us—and in a respectable house, too! Who would have thought of such a thing! George has gone for the doctor, but it’s no doctor that’s wanted here, I’m thinking, unless it be for her ladyship. I feel that faint myself that it’s all I can do to keep my legs,” and wrenching himself free from David’s detaining hand, the little man disappeared with flying coat-tails towards the back premises, perhaps in search of something that was to help him to keep his legs.

“Come back! You haven’t told me anything!” called David after him, wild with terror, but Mr. Belt neither heard nor heeded him. Looking up the staircase he could see that lights were moving above, and could catch the whisper of ex-

cited voices forcibly hushed. The usually so correct and conventionally placid physiognomy of a London house had been convulsed by some recent and perhaps terrible event. Unable to bear the suspense any longer David, with a thousand mad surmises in his head, mounted the stairs to the first landing. The drawing-room door was wide open and the room deserted; no lamp had yet been lit on the landing, the lights and whispers were higher up. He stood for a moment looking up towards the second storey. He had never been beyond this landing, though he vaguely understood that Sir Augustus's private apartments were situated up there. It was there evidently that the centre of movement was to be sought. With a beating heart, expecting he knew not what, he mounted the second stairs.

Here also the first door he came to was wide open, and here also no lamp was lit. The summer twilight struggled uncertainly with a single flickering candle-flame, and by the unequal light he saw Jessie Alington on her knees with her back to the door, and busied with something which he could not immediately distinguish. There were servants in the passage—so it seemed to him afterwards, when looking back on the scene—but at the moment, having seen her, he saw nothing else. Without waiting to ask a question he stepped across the threshold, and then only perceived that the thing on the carpet was Sir Augustus Alington, lying at full length on his back, with a ghastly and strangely stained face turned up to the ceiling. Close by his head stood a basin of cold water in which Jessie was feverishly dipping and re-dipping

a towel, with who knows what confused idea of hope or help in her poor bewildered brain.

"He is dead!" she said aloud, even as David stood still beside her, and, flinging the towel into the basin, she let herself sink backwards until, after the fashion of a child, she was sitting on her heels, and remained for a moment quite still, watching one spot she had been washing over and over again, without being able to remove the stain. Presently she seemed to notice the new shadow beside her, and turned slowly round; then, with a sudden spasmodic contraction of all her features, she sprang to her feet and stood looking at him wildly and evidently trying to speak.

David did not notice her; he was looking at the man on the ground. There was a dark pool on the carpet, and the head seemed lying almost in it. While he was still trying to understand what it all meant, Jessie spoke:

"Why did you come back?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "Did you guess?"

"Guess what?" he heard his own voice replying, without having known that he meant to ask.

"This here! You must surely see—look nearer!" and, clutching at his hand, she pulled him forwards and downwards towards the prostrate figure. "You see, don't you?" With her other hand she had taken the candlestick from the table and was lighting up the motionless, upturned face whose ghastly pallor was so sharply cut in two by the black eye-band. The fingers that clutched his were clammy with the cold water they had just been dabbling in, as David vaguely noticed, and the candle was held so unsteadily that it rained wax on

to the smooth black hair, which had scarcely been disarranged by the fall. Something flashed up in the stray ray of the candle: David recognised a pistol-barrel, and with it the situation became clear, though not its explanation. There was a red smear on the right side of the forehead—the same place that Jessie had been trying to wash, and out of which the thick blackish blood kept oozing slowly, but no other disfigurement. Probably it was the only clean shot that Sir Augustus had ever taken in his life. A small Moorish table, laden with costly ash-holders which had never been used, had been overturned by the fall, but that was all the disorder created.

In moments of crisis our sensations are generally of the most improbable. What David felt, having grasped the facts of the case, was not exactly horror of the event, and not even pity, but an almost indomitable repugnance to seeing Jessie in such near proximity to that thing on the carpet. Had he followed his first impulse he would have ordered her from the room, or even led her from it, or at the very least placed himself between her and that ghastly object. If he did not do so it was only because another and a stronger instinct told him he had no rights—less rights than ever in face of that dead man. So, instead of doing anything, he stood still, perhaps looking a little more stolid than usual, and contenting himself with anxiously watching the distance between the train of her tea-gown and that dark pool that was slowly soaking into the thick Turkey carpet. He had a notion that if her dress brushed that pool he would not be able to stand still any longer.

"And this happened just now? Since I left the house?" he asked, at last. In the first instant he had meant to ask, "Are you sure he is dead?" but something in the open black eye had answered him already.

"You had not left the house when it happened. It would not have happened if you had not been here."

"I don't understand."

"Not yet?" she turned upon him in sudden, genuine fury. "Do you not understand that it is *we* who have killed him—you and I! Why did you ever see me on that rock? Why did you not forget me long ago? And why, oh why did you make me love you—whether I wanted or not? You must understand, you *must*! Think of how we stood down-stairs—that sound at the door—you heard it too?—it was he, of course," pointing to the figure at their feet. "He saw us, he guessed everything, and he came up-stairs and did *this*! Oh, I understand it all perfectly; it is too horribly clear. I know also why he asked me yesterday whether I believed in love: he must have suspected for long—and how he must have suffered—poor Augustus, poor Augustus! Oh, why did I ever see you?"

Her wild, white face was turned upon him with a look almost of abhorrence. She was now speaking at the top of her voice, regardless of the open door and the whispering servants outside. With a movement that was purely instinctive, born perhaps of his innate Scotch caution, David went up to the door and closed it. In measure, as he had time to think, the horror was gaining on him, but it

was not in him to lose his head entirely. The candle which she had put down anyhow, was in danger of catching her sleeve; he noticed it and silently altered its position. But to her words he made no reply. He was going over the last half-hour in his thoughts, and trying to get things into their proper places, while his eyes came back again to the dead man on the ground, who had always appeared to him so insignificant in life, and who had suddenly become so fearfully important by ceasing to be. He was shivering a little as he stood there, though he did not know it—perhaps with excitement, or perhaps with cold, for some one had thrown up the window to let out the smell of gunpowder, and the abruptly-cooled air struck full on his soaked shoulders. The soft hiss of the rain on the pavement stole up from the street below, like an echo of those whispers on the landing outside, and from the shelves around the pelicans and hooded eagles—fitfully illuminated by the dancing candle-rays, which seemed to put momentary life now into one pair of round glass eyes and now into another—stared down in blank amazement at the motionless thing on the carpet. Jessie had half-fallen on to the low sofa beside her, and lay there, bent almost double, her face pressed to the cushions, and her hands, after wandering about as though in search of that tangible hold which all women seem to require in moments of high-strung emotion, had settled down in a convulsive clutch of the silken tassels.

“You should come away from here,” said David, abruptly, unable any longer to resist the impulse within him; but at the sound of his voice she

raised her head and gave him another of those horrified glances.

"Are you still here? I told you to go. I must never see you again; we must never meet; we are his murderers, you and I. Go, oh go!" she passionately cried, pointing with an unsteady finger towards the door. "I cannot bear to see you, not even for one minute longer!"

"I shall go," said David, suddenly, raising his bowed head. "I am going this minute, exactly as you command; but——" and as he turned close to the door his brown eyes blazed for one passing moment—"I shall come back again."

PART III.

CHAPTER I.

"How old are you, Monica?" asked Mrs. M'Farrel, abruptly, one fine September afternoon, when mother and daughter, side by side on the upper terrace of Craigie Towers, were basking in the thin but clear autumn sunshine.

"Twenty-three, of course, mamma," said Monica, slightly startled, having remained unaware of the critical glances which for some minutes past Mrs. M'Farrel had been sending over the edge of her silken crochet-work and towards her daughter's pensive face. "Surely you know that?"

"I suppose I do; but it's hard to believe. You look thirty, at least."

Circumspection in the choice of her expressions was not in Mrs. M'Farrel's line. Her own skin being, in spite of its phenomenal whiteness, almost as impenetrable as that of an elephant, it did not often occur to her that the skin of other people might be otherwise constituted. Least of all would it have appeared to her credible that any daughter could feel hurt by what any mother could say to her.

"Twenty-three, you say," she continued her

reflections aloud; "and David is twenty-six, if I remember right."

Monica's face was turned towards the sea, and she made no comment; but the hands which lay in her lap were clasped a little tighter.

"Monica," burst out Mrs. M'Farrel, having contained herself for just half a minute longer, "it must be coming right this time!"

Monica was on the rack—a sort of moral rack on which her mother was for ever unconsciously and even tenderly stretching her, but not for an instant would she pretend to misunderstand.

"No, mamma," she said, turning her flushed face back towards her mother. "It is not coming right, either this time or any other time. It can never come right."

"I should just like to know why not?" Mrs. M'Farrel was beginning, with her round face much redder than her daughter's, and her semicircular eyebrows twitching in a way which always portended irritation; but Monica quietly interrupted her.

"Because he told me so himself."

"Told you so himself? How could he do that? You didn't propose to him, did you, and get refused?" On any other lips the laugh which accompanied the words would have been offensive, almost coarse; but not only were Mrs. M'Farrel's lips too dainty ever to be offensive, but there was something curiously irresponsible about her, which made it difficult ever to take her quite seriously.

Monica winced ever so slightly as she answered.

"No; but I had heard a false report of his being engaged, and I congratulated him, and then he

got angry, and told me he would never marry—never marry anybody, which means, of course, neither me nor anybody else.”

“When was that?”

Mrs. M'Farrel's eyebrows were twitching ominously, while the pearl-grey ruches on her ample bosom began to rise and fall, like that of the water in the bay when a storm is brewing.

“Last year, in London; some time before he left England.”

Mrs. M'Farrel made several more savage dabs with her crotchet-needle, during which her expression was enough to strike terror into the heart of anybody not acquainted with her play of physiognomy, and then the cloud lifted as suddenly as it had descended.

“Bah!” she said, jerking up one of her plump shoulders almost to her ear. “Some young man's fad! They've all got ideas at times; but we'll cure him of them, Monica, we'll cure him of them!”

Both the eyebrows and the ruches settled down as she spoke, while the crotchet-wool began to be more kindly treated.

“You don't understand,” said Monica, slowly. “I don't want to cure him. He has some unhappiness in his life—of that I am sure; but he does not want me or my comfort, and I shall not force it on him. He is coming here only to take a rest, and only as my cousin—remember that, mamma; only as my cousin—and if you try to make him into anything more, or to press him in any way, I shall ask him to go away again. I promise you I will, and I know he will go. Oh, you don't understand—you don't understand at all!”

She had begun very quietly, but before she had done her eyes were flashing through tears. Mrs. M'Farrel looked at her daughter in surprise—one of the constant surprises which Monica had been giving her since babyhood—and also in some admiration, for Monica's face only wanted strong emotion to make it beautiful. Surely that young fool couldn't be so blind as not to see that for himself?—and in that case, of course, her interference would be superfluous. It was partly this reflection, and partly her inveterate habit when the real tug of battle came, and having spluttered up to the last moment, of submitting unconditionally to her daughter, that coloured the almost meek reply—

“Of course, my dear, I shall do nothing that you dislike,” but the ruches heaved again as she said it, with a sigh this time, for she loved interference in exact proportion as she mismanaged it, and had been counting on the impending visit as a fine field for activity.

“I hope not,” said Monica, almost sternly; and at the same time she rose from her chair.

“I had better be seeing after the tea—they will be here directly,” she said, with artificial quiet, as she left the terrace.

Out of sight of her mother her expression changed. The fine eyebrows contracted in a frown, not nearly so formidable to look at as that just seen on Mrs. M'Farrel's face, but expressive of much more real displeasure.

No, she did not understand—that was at the root of the whole situation; she never had understood—that dear, foolish, blundering mother, whose only object in life was her daughter's happi-

ness, and who had yet given that same daughter more to suffer, in a small, quiet, every-day way, than many people suffer in a lifetime. A tactless friend is sometimes harder to bear than a heartless one, but a tactless parent—who but he who has undergone the trial can say what a refinement of torture it brings with it? Tact is not a matter of feelings, as is sometimes erroneously supposed, but purely a matter of certain fine fibres of sensibility which keep us in communication with the sensibilities of others, telling us when and what to speak, and when and how to be silent. There were no fibres about Mrs. M'Farrel, her moral personality was altogether too unmixed and too clean-cut to allow of anything so indefinite, and the consequence was that she was always treading on people's corns without knowing it. And what made matters worse was the impossibility of being angry with her—as well be angry with a colour-blind person for having different eyes than we have—a defect of constitution, nothing more, as Monica told herself when smarting under one of her mother's crude remarks. No, her mother would never understand, even though she had guessed her secret long ago. All she could hope for was that she would not betray her.

Having given the order about the tea, Monica hesitated for a moment at the foot of the stairs, and then mounted slowly to her own room. She had no inclination to face another discussion on the terrace, and a glance into the mirror in the hall had showed her her hair slightly disordered by the breeze. Her cheeks, too, were burning; was the hope which she had denied almost savagely to her

mother's face after all not quite dead? She could not herself have said. She was going to see David that afternoon, after not having seen him for more than a year, and after months during which it had seemed as though she were never to see him again; for the frontier skirmish so slightly spoken of by him had developed into something very like a frontier war, and when the news of his having been wounded reached England, all details had been awaiting. The day on which she had heard that he was on his way home, invalided but out of danger, and with his captaincy in his pocket, had been a day to remember in the chronicles of her hidden romance. And now he was coming here to pick up his strength in the sea air, and for a few happy weeks—they seemed happy in comparison to what had gone before—she would be able to minister to him and watch over him—almost as though he belonged to her. As for the general situation, it remained as mysterious to her as ever. His abrupt exchange last year, and departure from England, had as little obvious explanation as had had the Australian undertaking. She had given up even trying to sound his motives of action.

Monica had smoothed her hair at the glass, and re-arranged her dress, and still there were no signs of the visitors. She supposed she ought to go down again, but a curious reluctance to another *tête-à-tête* with her mother made her steps lag as she passed through the sitting-room which adjoined her bed-room. Her eyes passed vaguely from side to side, as though in search of some excuse for lingering longer. The door of a carved cupboard in the corner stood open; she went up to it, bent

down and pulled something from out of its depths: an old, flaxen-wigged, flat-nosed, wax doll, which she looked at, inattentively at first, and gradually with a dawning interest. She bent down a second time and took out another doll, then another. There were five dolls altogether, wasting their sweetness in the desert air of that cupboard, for this room had been the ancient nursery, and despite the rococo writing-table and the fashionable knick-knacks on the shelves, it held, hidden away in dark corners, more than one remnant of former days. Monica had always been an exceptionally tidy child—unnaturally tidy, as her far more careless mother used to call it—and she had also been one of those instinctively motherly children who love to throw baby-eyes into the future and see their own children playing with their own toys at some far-off shadowy date; for to such children marriage does not seem a possibility but a matter of course. The combination of these two qualities had resulted in even the noseless and even the one-legged dolls being religiously preserved, and finally taking upon themselves something of the sacredness of relics, while seeing the light of day only on such rare occasions as when some child visitor had to be amused, and all other means had failed. It was two years, at least, since Monica had even looked at the dolls, but apparently she was in the mood for them to-day, for the very first waxen face had begun to stir reminiscences.

This was Florinda, whose pancake-like nose owed its present shape to a fall from the upper to the lower terrace, and this hideously grinning brunette, whose wig had been worried off by the then

reigning fox terrier puppy and tacked on again wrong side foremost, and whose eyes rattled like dice inside her head, was the once lovely Christabelle. Then there was a negro minstrel, best preserved of any because least played with, and, finally, a dissipated-looking Highlander, with his bonnet at an impossible angle, and snow-white china knees. It was round this Highlander that most memories clung. A footstool happened to be standing conveniently near, and upon it Monica sat down with the doll in her hand, and, for want of anything better to do, fell into a day-dream—a day-dream that looked backward instead of forward.

She could remember the day very distinctly on which her Uncle Henry had given her the doll, on the occasion of one of his rare visits to the Towers, and the first time he had brought David with him. Her acquaintance, both with the doll and with her cousin, dated from the same day; also they both wore kilts, and though this was the solitary point of resemblance between them, it sufficed to interlace these two personages for ever after in the six-year-old mind. Officially the highlander had been christened "Bonnie Dundee," but to herself Monica always called him David; it was her own private secret, which she found a peculiar pleasure in guarding, and which not even David was allowed to know. Solitary children have ideas of that sort, and Monica always instinctively kept her thoughts from her mother. Her childish affection for the cousin who had taken her fancy by seeming at once so strong and so gentle, so entirely a boy and yet not thinking it necessary to despise her because she was only a little girl, had little else but passing

glimpses of the real David to feed on—for that was the time at which Mr. M'Farrel reigned supreme—and found a certain comfort in concentrating itself on the china David, who seemed in some parts his representative.

"On the day I'm thirty I shall give them all away," said Monica to herself, looking round at the scattered dolls. Then a smile, just tinged with bitterness, flitted over her quiet face. "But mamma says I look thirty already; perhaps I'd better give them away immediately: what can they be waiting for, the poor little idiots?"

The thought was still in her mind when a loud knock at the door made her start like a criminal surprised. Before she had time to say "Come in!" a voice which sent the blood tingling to her fingertips was saying: "May I?" and before she had given leave David was in the room. The day-dream had been so real as to shut her ears even to the long-expected wheels on the gravel.

"I was told I should find you here," said David, holding out his left hand—the right one was in a sling—"so I left the Pater and the little ones with Aunt Mercy and made my way up here. Dear me, Monica, you haven't gone back to dolls, have you?" And he cast a perplexed glance at the waxen and china figures, among which his cousin was sitting like a little girl at play.

"Only for half an hour," said Monica, rising almost in confusion. "How could I not have heard the carriage? Oh, David, how glad I am!"

She looked glad, and did not even mind looking it, as she took his sound hand and tenderly pressed it, as though afraid of doing the other one a harm,

looking the while questioningly into his face. Just at first she thought he looked ill, but a closer glance showed her that though he might have been ill he was getting well again; and despite the thinness of his cheeks and the unmistakable traces which hardships and privation had left on his forehead and about his mouth, it struck her immediately that he looked more like his old self than he had done when she met him last year in London; more like the David of old whose indescribable mixture of gravity and buoyancy had so caught her childish fancy. It was not that he was gayer, or even only less grave than usual, but only that something—she knew not what, but *something* had come back.

“You were too deep in your dolls, I suppose,” said David, looking round him. “This room takes me back somehow to my first visit here. You ought to put on a pinafore, Monica, to make the illusion more complete. Do I know any of these personages, I wonder?” And he picked up the well-preserved negro and looked at him critically.

“That’s Bananee,” said Monica, laughing with the happiness of seeing that her anxious surmises concerning his health had been unfounded.

“Rather like some of the chaps we’ve been thrashing over there, only a trifle darker in complexion. And this white-kneed gentleman, what’s he called? I seem to have seen him before.”

“That’s David,” said Monica, looking down almost affectionately at the rakish highlander.

“Very flattered, I’m sure, especially as to the knees! I’m sure mine never were so immaculate. Isn’t that the doll Pater brought you, and

I nearly got into a scrape about for sitting on in the train? I half fancied he was called 'Bonnie Dundee'?"

"For other people, yes, but for me——"

She broke off in what seemed to herself a most illogical confusion. What could it matter what she had called her dolls eighteen years ago? But David noticed nothing; for him the subject of the dolls was exhausted already.

"I've lots to tell you of our adventures over there," he said, letting Bananee drop rather uncere- moniously to the floor. "It was a hot time, but I had lots of luck. My arm will only need two months, they tell me."

"Oh, we're going to take such care of you, mother and I," said Monica, eagerly, as she pushed back the dolls into the cupboard, "that I believe it will take even less than two months. The air here is better than any tonic, and as for the dressing, I believe Dr. Drummond is a far better surgeon than doctor, though luckily we haven't needed him much in either capacity."

David was standing at the window now, looking out at the water, which, seen from this height and from this side, seemed to break on the very castle walls.

"Is Dr. Drummond still here?" he asked, without turning round.

"Of course, he is always here—he hates moving. He never even visits his daughter in Eng- land—Lady Alington, you know, the widow—he just makes her come here instead."

it, "Has she been here lately?"

it, "She is here now, I believe."

"Now?" asked David, veering round suddenly from the window. "Are you sure?"

"Yes—at least she was still here last Sunday, for I saw her in church," said Monica, momentarily surprised at his eagerness. "She *may* be gone since then, but I don't think so."

David said nothing more, and turned slowly back to the window, but the eyes which looked out across the bay and towards the roofs of St. Mallan's had caught the reflection of that inner happy light, which was apt at moments to transform his countenance and make of it another face.

CHAPTER II.

THOSE first few days at Craigie Towers were days of gaiety and pleasure, very nearly of real happiness, for its inmates, and although the motives of this general elation were rather at cross purposes with each other, the result, nevertheless, shed an unmistakable brightness over the already bright autumn days. Everybody had his or her private reason for being happy. Monica could not help rejoicing at the vicinity of David, who, on his side, was rejoicing at the thought of another neighbourhood, while Mrs. M'Farrel delightedly witnessed Monica's delight, from which she drew all sorts of inferences with regard to her private hopes, communicated—as opportunity offered—to her brother, by whom she knew them shared. As to Meg and Jean, *they* had no need of any artificial motive for happiness, since the mere fact of being sixteen and at the sea-side ought surely to be enough to fill any one's cup of joy. The smell of the salt air and of the sea-weed and of the other delightfully unusual things had, after a very brief struggle, gone straight to the somewhat unkempt heads of the twins, causing them to forget the dignity of their first "grown-up" frocks, to the extent of racing each other along the sands—yes, and even in unobserved moments paddling in the shallow pools,

and going mad over every star-fish and every empty cockle-shell that met them on the rocks. The wild spirits of the twin-sisters—all the wilder for having had to break through that barrier of shyness—would have infected even people inclined to melancholy, and naturally did not fail to influence the already so well disposed elders. It is astonishing what pretty pictures even plain people can help to compose, and Meg and Jean who, with their broad, liberally freckled faces, rough hair of no particular colour, and more solid than graceful limbs, were as unbeautiful as it is possible to be at sixteen with a good digestion, were for ever delighting the eye of their relatives by the various and ever eager groups they were continually falling into by the water's edge, or on the point of some rock they had just scaled like a couple of young goats escaped from restraint. Craigie Towers was a change indeed from the Manse, not only because of the star-fish and the sea-weeds, but also because of the glimpse it afforded into a sort of existence which over there in the little low rooms whose ceilings were always stained with lamp smoke, and between the stunted gooseberry bushes, they had hardly even suspected.

"If David were to marry Monica, then we could live here always," sighed Jean to Meg, before going to sleep one night.

"And always have cream puddings to dinner, and a footman to wait on us," was the sympathising reply.

From which remarks it will be correctly inferred that Mrs. M'Farrel had not thought it necessary to be rigorously discreet before her nieces, and that her hopes were shared by more than her brother.

In fact everybody was now looking on, and with feelings that inclined to be sanguine. When David leant against the piano on which Monica was picking out tunes in the twilight and asked her to play "Auld Lang Syne," the brother and sister exchanged a glance which said quite plainly: "We know what that means—he is coming round to the old idea." And when Monica opened the gate which was too stiff for David's left hand, both the plump, prosperous mother and the meagre, white-haired father felt their hearts leaping within them. Originally these two had not been unlike, the brother's face showed the same leaning towards circular lines, his figure the same inclination to breadth as that of the châtelaine of Craigie Towers; but circumstances had developed them in different directions, stamping upon them the marks of that essential difference which exists between people who have always had enough to eat and those who have generally had rather too little, so that while the sister's frame had become most comfortably padded and her features had generously broadened, the brother's very bones seemed to have shrunk to a mere shadow of what they had once been and his face to have been pared away into a point by some sharp instrument. And the difference was not a physical one only; it lay in other things as well, in that unconscious carriage of the head, for instance, which the prosperous man instinctively holds high, and the unsuccessful one unconsciously lowers, either sullenly or patiently as his nature may be, as though in expectation of some new blow. For long the white head had not been held so high as in these September days.

Monica alone saw more clearly. The light in his eyes which was duping David's other friends was not duping her. She saw the light as well as they—oh, far better even—but she knew that *she* had nothing to do with it, though having as yet no idea of who it was who could have lit the spark.

So little clue had she to the truth that a casual enquiry addressed by David to his doctor one day, when the dressing of the wound on the arm was over, had not yet opened her eyes.

"St. Mallans must be lonely to you, Doctor," said David, a little jerkily, just before Dr. Drummond took his leave.

"Not just now," said the doctor, with his delightfully gentle smile. "My daughter, luckily, finds that she can't quite do without sea air, and I profit accordingly."

"And she is staying for long?"

"Another week or so—until the weather breaks."

"That is nice for you," said David, abstractedly. He was asking himself just then whether he should not introduce himself as an old acquaintance—the rescuer of the rock, in fact—but decided in the negative. Dr. Drummond evidently recognised him as little as his daughter had done, and there were considerations which might make it more advisable to remain incognito a little longer.

It was only a few days after these words had been exchanged that the party from the Towers—all except Mrs. M'Farrel, who found she got enough exercise on the terrace—were on their way back from a ramble that had turned out longer than usual, making use of the picturesque but somewhat

slippery path that skirted the bay, where beds of overblown sea-pinks still made faint patches of colour among the stones, where the rocks never had time to get dry and the scanty grass-tufts were stiff with salt. Meg and Jean, intoxicated with the showers of spray now driving straight in their faces, and ravenous for afternoon tea, were as usual far ahead of their elders, anxious apparently to test each other's powers of lungs and sureness of ankles. They had just turned a corner which for the moment put them out of sight of the others, when Meg stood still panting beside a peculiarly inviting pool, broad and shallow as a pool should be, and most alluringly cushioned with spotless sand.

"Doesn't that look the very place to paddle in?" she asked, still breathless. "We'd have lots of time before the others catch us up."

"It does look lovely," was Jean's somewhat uncertain reply, "but won't it be a *little* bit cold to-day?"

"Oh, *you've* got no spirit!" decided Meg, who was the most enterprising of the two, and already busily unlacing her boots. "There's some real rose-coloured sea-weed at the other side and I mean to get it, and there's no way of getting it except through the water."

She stepped valiantly in, managing to make only a very slight grimace at the chilliness of the water, and with her skirts carefully tucked out of harm's way, and a pair of exceedingly robust calves freely displayed. What could it matter since there were only sea-gulls and crabs to see her?

"Is it very cold?" asked Jean, still hesitating, but already stooping towards her bootlaces. But

before the answer could come there was the sound of a loose stone rolling close at hand, and both Meg and Jean were struck dumb by the appearance of a tall, coal-black figure who, without further warning, rounded the rock beside them—the very screen on which they had counted. It was no spirit from the deep, however, as in the first shock of alarm they had not been far from believing, but a fashionably dressed lady in deep mourning, whose long black veil, tormented by the wind, serpented about her head like a winged snake, and whose golden-brown hair made the one spot of brilliancy in the dark picture.

A moment of agonised indecision followed. In face of this unlooked-for emergency all the native shyness of the countrified visitors rushed back upon them in full force. At thought of her exposed and just now acutely scarlet feet and of the skirts which she *dared* not drop for fear of damage to the hem, even the intrepid Meg felt ready to sink straight through the sand and also the solid rock below. To take to one's heels seemed the obvious thing to do under the circumstances, but considering that those particular heels were bare the plan was unfeasible. With the luckier Jean, matters stood differently; having partially recovered her senses and suppressed a rising shriek, she turned and disappeared in the direction she had come from, treacherously abandoning her sister to her uncertain fate.

The stranger had apparently been almost as startled as the twins, for she too had abruptly stood still. It was not until Jean had vanished round the bend of the path that she attempted to open con-

versation; but even before she spoke the astonishment on her beautiful face had begun to melt into a smile of understanding.

"Don't run away too," she remarked, a little hastily. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I've done that sort of thing dozens of times myself, and not so very long ago either; only"—and the smile turned frankly to a laugh—"I usually chose warmer weather for it."

"I thought we were alone," murmured Meg, taking heart as she glanced at the stranger's face, and astonished to find that it was quite young, not so very much older than her own, in fact.

"Are you alone? I mean the rest of the party are not with you? You are one of the Miss Ellis's, are you not, who are staying at Craigie Towers?"

Meg, out of the water by this time, admitted that she was.

The strange lady was boring holes in the sand with the point of her crape-covered parasol.

"Your brother's arm is much better, I am told?"

"Ever so much better," said Meg, delighted to take any superfluous attention off her feet. "He takes quite long walks now; we've been out two hours to-day."

"Then he is here?" She looked round her with a suddenly affrighted glance. "Where is he?"

"Close at hand; he must be here any moment. Oh, dear! How he's going to scold me!" and at the thought of the brotherly displeasure, Meg, losing sight of shyness, positively threw herself on her shoes and stockings.

"I am going home," said the black lady, sud-

denly, and turned back the way she had come, moving away rather slowly between the rocks.

Meanwhile Jean, flying along the path, had run full against the rest of the party.

"Has anything happened?" asked her father, slightly startled by his daughter's more than usually dishevelled appearance. "Where is Meg?"

"She's in a pool of water, talking to a beautiful black lady, with two yards of veil and golden hair," declared Jean. "She came round a rock just as I was beginning to take off my boots, but luckily the laces weren't undone yet, and so I left her to fight it out by herself."

"Heartless child!" smiled Monica. "A beautiful black lady with golden hair! That can only be Lady Alington—don't you think so, David?" But David, without waiting to hear more, was already striding over the rocks.

He arrived in the moment at which the figure in mourning had just turned, and disregarding his sister, to her intense relief, straightway caught up the fugitive. Silently his left hand was held out, his heart being too full for the words to come quickly. The recollection of when and where he had seen her last was throwing a strange sort of awe upon the bliss of the meeting.

She had stood still even before he had quite reached her side, and although she had not turned her head. Her lips were apart, and her face obviously losing colour as he faced round. Her hand had been impulsively put out towards his, then as sharply drawn back, as though at some sudden recollection, while her eyes, having rapidly explored his face, were turned aside.

"Jessie!" he said, only just above his breath, in order to escape the ears of Meg—luckily deep in the lacing of her boots—and yet in a tone which very well conveyed both astonishment and reproach.

"Have you forgotten what I told you when—when—the time I saw you last?" asked Jessie, in the same guarded tone.

"I never forget anything you have said; but I also told you something. Do you not remember?"

"You must have known I was here," she answered, disregarding his remark. "You should not have stayed."

"I *did* know it, just as you knew of my presence and also stayed. In what have I failed? Is it not enough that I have not molested you? That I have left it to chance to bring us together, as I knew it would, sooner or later?"

"I was in my father's house," answered Jessie, the angry colour flooding her white cheeks. "It is you who should have gone."

"What for?" he asked, looking her squarely in the eyes.

But her answering whisper was drowned in the voices of the appearing party, and for to-day there was no further explanation to be had.

Nobody except Monica noticed David's silence on the rest of the homeward way. But though he did not speak, he appeared more thoughtful than depressed. In truth he was somewhat astonished at his reception, but saw therein no reason for any serious alarm. He knew the woman he loved well enough to have been prepared for something of the sort.

CHAPTER III.

MISS BRAIL was making blackberry jam—a thing which no one inside St. Mallans understood better than she—and her niece was watching her, much as she used to watch her in the olden days, and yet with a difference which she herself found hard to explain. Despite the irresistible fascination which the full baskets of glossy berries and the jam-pots waiting to receive them had exercised upon her youthful mind, it had always been with a certain latent feeling of disapprobation that she witnessed the transmission of the one into the other, and even the admiration which Aunt Mina's undeniable dexterity forced from her had been but a grudging one. Blackberry jam was an excellent thing; but the fabrication of it did not appear to her to be the legitimate occupation for the aunt of a young person who dreamed of re-placing the family on the level from which it had fallen. It was not only the large white apron and the finger-tips dyed purple from the blackberry juice, which got upon her nerves, but the whole principle of the thing, and the conviction which such spectacles always pressed back upon her that Aunt Mina had been planned for a first-class housekeeper in a well-to-do house, but never for the head of such an establishment.

Those had been the reflections of Miss Drum-

mond; but, strangely enough, Lady Alington thought rather differently. It is wonderful how much even a very little training in the school of life can do in the way of opening wider horizons, and Jessie's nature was like a thirsty soil, ever eager to absorb any drop of knowledge that came its way. It had been since coming back to her old home that she had become conscious of this new tolerance within her, while discovering how crude—yes, and even snobbish—had been many of her cherished girl's ideas. It was astonishing, too, to perceive how everything had changed since she saw it last. Those surroundings, which had appeared so homely and so dull, now took possession of her in a manner they had never done when they had been the frame of her daily life. The bay was no longer so small, nor the rocks so monotonous; the tiny irregular rooms, instead of appearing mean after the splendours of Allwood, welcomed her with an impression of cosiness which she had never been able to find in those vast and frigid apartments. The chief street of St. Mallans dull? Why, it had ten times more character in it than Bond Street; and so on with everything else. It was the inverse of the process through which the returned absentee generally passes, and rendered possible only by a strong feeling of reaction. A complete transformation scene, but with a very easy explanation. That chronic want of satisfaction which had pursued the developing woman had been but the groping after one supreme interest in life, without which so ardent and so richly endowed a nature could never find rest—something in which to merge itself and on which to spend all its burdensome treasures.

She had found it indeed, only to lose it again; but even the passing glimpse she had had of its possibilities had been enough to reduce the world and all things within it to their proper proportions.

But it was her relations who had changed most of all—or rather they had not changed at all, but only the eyes that looked upon them. What struck her now about Jem's laugh was not so much its explosiveness as the unmistakably genuine ring, so long missed amid the polite titters of society; and having seen a few celebrities near she already found it possible to acquiesce in her father's indifference to fame, and even to wonder whether he was not right in his choice of obscurity. Even Aunt Mina's velvet hair-band had gained by comparison with the ringletted "fronts" of dowager-duchesses. Her figure had, if anything, grown more wooden in the last three years, and her eyes more lustreless, and yet Lady Alington spoke to her in a far more conciliating tone than had ever done Jessie Drummond. Whoever has suffered is quick to recognise the mark of true suffering on another's face, and by dint of studying her aunt's features at unobserved moments, Jessie had come to discover there things she had never suspected.

"She must, after all, have been awfully fond of poor mamma," she said to herself to-day as she watched the rigid profile and mechanically-working hands, which did whatever they did accurately and fast, yet visibly without enjoyment. "Nothing seems really to interest her; now that I come to think of it I don't remember ever having seen her look pleased with anything, not even with black-berry jam, nor very much displeased either, except

with a burnt pudding. I think I understand that—to live so entirely for one person that when that person is gone nobody else and nothing else counts. Yes, it is quite possible.”

“Aunt Mina,” she said aloud, suddenly, “can’t I help you to sort those blackberries?”

Miss Brail’s profile did change then for an instant. She was so astonished that her Noah’s Ark figure gave a jerk, as though galvanised, and a jam-pot was knocked over as the result. Such an offer was unprecedented even from Jessie Drummond, who, though reckless about her hands when seaweed or limpets were concerned, had always—purely as a matter of principle—drawn the line at blackberries—and this was Lady Alington who was offering her help!

“You’ll spoil your dress,” said the old maid, quickly, half-suspicious of being made fun of. “Black is bad to clean.”

“So much the worse,” said Jessie, with whom a suggestion always meant immediate action. “I’m not going to look on any longer,” and before Miss Brail had recovered she had tucked a towel round her in guise of apron, and was seated at the table, busy with a fresh basket.

Miss Brail looked at the volunteer askance, and still suspiciously. The thing did not seem natural, somehow, and yet there was no trace of a smile at the corners of the grave mouth, nor any light of mockery in the thoughtful eyes.

“Tell me,” said Jessie, when they had been working in silence for some minutes, and speaking with unwonted hesitation, “could mamma make jam as well as you?”

There was another slight jerk of the hands, but the answer which came after a moment was spoken in a voice that was almost as flat as usual.

"Your mother"—with an especial stress on the more homely word—"never had the chance of getting as much practice as I. She married young, as you know, and gave up such things as jam-making from that day. Your father was no doubt afraid of her spoiling her fine lady's hands."

The tone sharpened towards the end; it was the very tone which had so often aroused Jessie's antagonism, but to-day the hidden challenge was not taken up.

When another minute had passed in silence Jessie asked, a little lower—

"Am I like her, Aunt Mina? You've never told me that."

Miss Brail's shaking hands put down a full pot on the table, while she stared perplexedly at her niece. Evidently she had nearly made up her mind to be angry, but suddenly—for the second time within five minutes—her face changed, positively changed, and she spoke in a voice which Jessie scarcely recognised.

"You're so like her, child! God help me, that I've never been able to look at you straight!"

The words came raspingly, as though dragged from her. A sort of spasm passed over her features, and she quickly moved back for fear, no doubt, of something dropping into the jam, while the withered eyelids were blinking fast.

Jessie threw down the fork she was operating with, and snatched at the purple-stained hands.

"Oh, Aunt Mina!" she cried, almost joyfully,

"I am so glad I have seen you cry; I feel now that I can love you. It isn't too late, I assure you; try it and you'll see. There's no one now to love me, since Augustus is gone."

"Your father, girl—your brother," murmured Miss Brail, trying to recover herself, but with a still remarkably unsteady mouth.

"Yes, but that is not enough, somehow," said Jessie, staring wistfully from the window. "Here's Jim," she added, in the same breath. "Wipe your eyes, Aunt Mina, or he'll be making jokes."

It was the first time within Jessie's recollection that she was sorry to have a *tête-à-tête* with Aunt Mina cut short—surely a curious symptom!

"Visitors in the wind," remarked Jim, putting his yellow block of a head in at the door. "Oh, I say," and there came the usual guffaw, which was so much easier to bear now than formerly, "is her ladyship turned cook?"

Jim's jokes had not improved within three years, nor his spirits sobered down—he was one of those men who take half a lifetime to stop being a boy.

"Visitors?" Jessie started to her feet. "I'm not visible, of course. You'll receive them like a good boy, won't you? and give Aunt Mina time to wash her hands."

She was out of the room as she spoke and down one of the queer little flights of stairs that connected one apartment with the other, and which had proved such pitfalls to poor Sir Augustus during his convalescence. In the passage she met her father in one of his rare ill-humours. He was just back from a final visit to a convalescent patient, and with a handsome fee in his pocket, which the

man had had the brutality to hand him in person. The moment of taking a fee always remained a little painful to the former man of leisure—the one respect in which he did not quite fit into this lower level, and the fee having been this time particularly handsome naturally augmented his annoyance.

“Hullo! Where are you off to?” he apostrophised his fugitive daughter in a less tender tone than usual.

“Out of the way of visitors. Jim says there are some coming.”

“It will be the people from the Towers, no doubt. I forgot to mention that they spoke of coming here to-day. It seems the girls fell in love with you yesterday on the shore.”

“From the Towers? No, they cannot see me,” said Jessie, a little brokenly. “I’m going to the tannery.”

“Surely this is absurd, Jessie,” said the doctor, with as much irritation as he was capable of. “There is no reason for hiding yourself as you do, now that the year is over. They’re coming to see you, I’ll be bound, and not Aunt Mina. What excuse do you want me to make?”

“Say I’ve got a headache—say anything you like, but I can’t come down. Ah, papa darling, don’t force me, when I tell you I can’t.”

Dr. Drummond shrugged his shoulders, while his usual indulgent smile spread over his features.

“Have your own way, child, or rather, I know you’ll have it, whether I say yes or no; but how Aunt Mina is to rise to the occasion——”

He went off, as ever, acquiescent in the inevitable; not thinking it worth while to squander en-

ergy in a combat whose issue was to him a foregone conclusion—while Jessie, scarcely daring to look behind her, flew along the wooden gallery and up the creaking tannery stairs.

Here, in her old haunt, which within the last weeks had almost donned its old physiognomy, she could feel safe, or almost so. From here she would not even catch the sound of the carriage stopping at the door, nor of the greeting that followed; and that was how it should be, for she did not want to distinguish the voices in the chorus. Perhaps it was rather heartless to have abandoned Aunt Mina in this way; but there was no help for it to-day, for to meet *him* again was impossible; that brief interview on the shore yesterday had made that clearer to her than ever.

Although nearly fourteen months had gone by since the tragic event which had so abruptly put an end to her brief married life, Jessie had scarcely even begun to recover from the shock she had experienced. That shock had been so great that it had not only brought her to the verge of brain-fever, but kept her for months hovering between health and one of those nervous disorders to which more especially imaginative women are liable. From the very first moment the fearful event had impressed her not only as a catastrophe, but even more as a retribution. The self-accusations, unreasonably vehement—as are apt to be all those impulses standing in direct connection with the imagination—which had overwhelmed her in face of her dead husband, had laid upon her a sense of guilt so oppressive that after more than a year it kept her soul bowed down to the ground. To her

quick fancy it had not been difficult to reconstruct the scene almost exactly as it happened—to follow the workings of the jealous husband's mind, to see him, devoured by angry suspicions, approaching the door of the inner drawing-room at the very moment when the lightning-flash would have showed him his wife, apparently in his rival's arms. For days, perhaps for weeks past he had been living in the dread of being betrayed, and seeing what that lightning-flash showed him, he had believed himself betrayed already. She had not forgotten the sound at the door which had startled her from her trance—it all fitted in perfectly, as perfectly as the moment at which the shot had fallen. Deducting one thing from the other, she had infallibly arrived at the conclusion that she was the cause of Sir Augustus's death—she and that other man whom she had been weak enough to love. That she was in point of fact guiltless of all but a very common imprudence, that she had been surprised at the very moment of the accomplished sacrifice, that the suspicions had been false, the despair groundless, did not weigh with her excited spirit, quivering with the actuality of the catastrophe. Her fierce self-reproach would listen to no parley—she had killed her husband—she and David—and of course they must suffer for it, and the first condition of the punishment was that they must never meet again. She would make up for not having been able to love this self-slain man by remaining his faithful widow.

All that sense of pity which had first inclined her towards him, and which familiarity had ended by turning into irritation, came rushing back upon her with a strength that was almost pain. Every

impatient word she had ever spoken to him, every repulse she had given him, rose up now to accuse her. That earnest, persistent, humble affection which she had regarded principally as an inconvenience, now grew up suddenly in memory to something great and sublime, sealed as it was by blood. But just as there had been a certain want of measure in her previous irritation, so was there now in her present attitude of mind, for although she had learnt something of life, she had not yet learnt self-government, nor even self-judgment. Bitterly she accused herself of not having found the way of returning that lost love, but did not think of accusing herself of having ever married him, which in reality was the only serious harm she had done him.

Of David she had, since the day of the catastrophe, thought only with a certain shuddering of the spirit, which for a time had made her believe that she hated him. She was too deeply plunged in her new grief to have discovered yet that she loved him as well as ever, for Jessie was one of those women whose nature actually demands violent emotions of some sort, whose over great faculties in this direction require to be satisfied, and such women are easily dominated by one idea at a time, to the exclusion of all others.

The meeting on the shore yesterday had brought a ray of light into her troubled soul, and had troubled it even more, for she knew now that there was going to be a struggle, not only with him but also with herself.

Perhaps even the struggle was very near. As she sat in the old rocking-chair with an open book

on her knees, she was instinctively lending an ear to every sound from below. The well-cut, but rigorously plain folds of her heavy black dress fell straight to the ground, as though hewn out of black marble. Under the spotless widow's cap, which she meant never again to lay aside, her face looked anxious and strained, older than its actual age. A new thought had come to her; she was asking herself whether by retiring from the rest of the company she had not created the very opportunity she had wished to avert. Yesterday, on the shore, he had not looked like a man who is to be frightened off by a word. Would her sham excuse baulk him of his purpose? She could not believe it. If he wanted to find her he would find her even here.

When, after some twenty minutes or so, the crazy old staircase creaked under a man's foot, she changed colour indeed, but not from surprise. He had tracked her then, and she must face him. Well, since it had to be, better perhaps sooner than later. She closed her teeth and clasped her hands more rigidly in her lap, as though to gather strength for the battle which she knew was coming.

CHAPTER IV.

HE came in without immediately perceiving her. The rocking-chair stood to one side of the bow-shaped window, and he sent his eyes first into the inner depth of the large vague space.

"If you are looking for me, Captain Ellis, I am here," said Jessie, a little defiantly, wanting to be done with suspense.

David turned quickly.

"Yes, I am looking for you, Lady Alington."

His tone was as determined as hers, but far more measured than the one in which he had addressed her yesterday by the sea. The agitation of that first meeting had evidently been overcome; he had reviewed the situation and decided on his course of action.

"Did my father tell you I was here?" she asked, sharply.

"No, I did not ask him; I went by my own recollections. You have described this tannery to me often enough—last year in London—as no doubt you have not forgotten. I knew it was the most likely place to find you in, and I let my memory lead me."

"And what right had you—" she began rather loud, anxious, perhaps, to work herself into anger, but he interrupted her very quietly.

"That is what I am going to explain. You *know* that I have the right to put to you a certain question, but naturally I should not dream of forcing it upon you at an inconvenient moment. If the time and the place do not suit you, say so. Order me to go, and I shall go at once. Remember only that the question will be asked, if not to-day then some other day."

He stood before her, at some distance still, as though waiting for her permission to approach. It really wanted but one word to make him go, but Jessie, her averted face turned to the window, wondered whether she ought to speak it. The deliberateness, even the politeness, of his tone disconcerted her. For passionate pleadings she had been prepared, even for bitter reproaches, but not for being met in this almost business-like fashion. Would it not be better to have done with the battle, once for all, since she was quite sure that David meant what he said?

"You can ask your question now," she said, unwillingly; "but I tell you it is no use."

"Thank you."

He came a few steps nearer.

"All I wanted to ask was whether you expect me seriously to accept what you said to me yesterday?"

"Naturally I do—quite seriously."

"Then it is as well you should know that I do *not* take it so."

She turned her head swiftly towards him, revealing her full face at last. A flash of real anger had come to her help.

"And for what reason?" she asked, in a voice

that shook with scorn. "Am I a child? Do my words mean nothing?"

"I think they mean a great deal—to you, but I refuse to accept them as your last decision."

"Is it not the same thing I told you on the day—the last time I saw you in London?"

"Exactly the same; but I never took that as final either. You were speaking under the influence of violent excitement; you could not even rightly know what you were saying."

"You think so? But since I repeat the same thing now, when the excitement is over?"

"If you repeat it, it is only because the excitement is not over, although you may not be aware of it yourself."

Jessie gave him one more glance—hard, almost vindictive—and then looked back towards the window.

"No, no, it is impossible," she said, in sudden haste; "it can never be."

"Why not, Jessie?" asked David, in a far less business-like tone, but not moving from his place, although he had thrilled from head to foot.

"Because we are murderers—I told you so on that terrible day—because it is we who killed him."

"And I tell you it is not so. I say to you what you said to me on that same day, when I reproached you with those visitors—do you remember? You said then: 'It was not I, it was Fate,' and I answer you now: It was not we who were the cause of that misfortune, it was Fate."

"A fate which we conjured up ourselves. If you had not come that day he would not be dead."

“And why did I come that day? To take leave of you for ever! You might as well say that it was our very resolve to part which was the reason of his death, for if there had been no parting there would have been no weakness—I am certain of it, for I am sure of you as I am of myself—not even that momentary physical weakness which betrayed us. Must we pay for the very sacrifice we were making with the happiness of our whole lives? No, no, Jessie, we are innocent, whatever your scruples may say, and there is no reason why we should not be happy yet—unless”—and his face became as dark as though a shadow had fallen on it—“unless you do not require me for your happiness, unless you have ceased to love me.”

“I have not ceased to love you,” answered Jessie, slowly, but without hesitation, her head thrown back wearily against the chairback, her eyes far out at sea, lost in the cloud banks to the west, whose undersides were beginning to take on to themselves the dazzling, almost crudely crimson and golden tints of an autumn sunset. “If I had ceased to love you the situation would be simple indeed, delightfully simple. At first I thought it was so; I even thought I hated you, but now I know that I don’t. I suppose it will not change ever, since *that* could not change it. It is hard, certainly.”

“Jessie!” said David, breathlessly, and he was moving irresistibly forwards when another glance struck him, one of cold astonishment this time.

“Wait—you don’t seem to understand—I was merely stating the case. Whether I care for you or not cannot alter anything about the matter, or rather it ought to make it all the clearer to you that

we have no right to each other. It is even juster so, for if I had ceased to care for you my punishment would not be complete—I should have nothing to give up, no sacrifice to make, whereas this way—this way, don't you see? The penance is so hard that perhaps—perhaps it may condone the crime.”

Her lips twitched and her bosom heaved as she said the words, but even through the rising tears the great blue-green eyes looked at him unflinchingly.

“There is no crime!” cried David, with the impetuosity of a great and acute pity. Even through the midst of the irritation, which this excessive remorse caused him, he could not fail to be touched by its obvious sincerity. Observing her now at his leisure and closely, there were differences in her face, which, more than any words, spoke of the emotions undergone in this past year. The complexion had lost some of its warmth, the rich sweep of the lips had been toned down by a line of pain; there was a new marble-like whiteness about the brows, and on the temple a branching of blue veins had become visible, giving to the whole face a suggestion of delicacy which he had never before observed, and which the studied austerity of the dress did but enhance.

“There is no crime, Jessie,” he repeated, more gently, “and the penance for what was at most a weakness has been hard enough already—it is written on your face. If it is the tongues of the world you are afraid of——”

She broke in with a short, proud laugh. “The world! They might say what they liked, so long

as I knew it was not true. It is my own conscience I am afraid of, not their tongues."

David threw up his hands with a gesture almost of discouragement.

"Jessie, Jessie—do you know what you are doing? You are killing yourself with these self-torturing thoughts. Will you let me prove to you that you are innocent? That the fault, even of that weakness, lay only on my side? That it is not right that you should sacrifice yourself only because of a fancied fault?"

And in a voice which was low at first, but whose vibrating tones penetrated to the furthest corners of the dim space, David began to speak those words which he had never been able to speak before, though it had almost killed him to keep them back—the words which had lain ready in his heart as long ago as the very day of their first meeting, which on many an evening when sitting alone in his Australian farm, resting from the long day of labour which had been laboured for her alone, he had spoken to her in spirit. Swiftly, breathlessly, and with a passion which looked out of his shining eyes but which in sight of her black dress yet managed to keep a strong hand upon itself, he confessed to her the whole of that irresistible love which she knew of already, although it had never been directly alluded to between them—pleading the length of his patience, the bitterness of his first disappointment, the renunciation of last year, as so many prices paid for the happiness he claimed, proving to her with all the logic of a lover who was at the same time an honest man, that they did not deserve to suffer more than they had already suf-

ferred. He would not hurry her, he assured her over again; his patience was not exhausted yet, he would wait as long as appeared to her seemly, if only she would give him the assurance he desired. And she listened the while, slowly losing colour, her hands clasped so tightly in her lap that the blood seemed to have left them, but with rigid figure and rigid eyes that were fixed straight in front of her, and only the heaving of her breast betraying the quickened breath. From under the gaudy clouds to the west one of the very last rays of the setting sun had hit the tannery window, throwing handfuls of gold into the furthest, darkest corners of the gloomy space and painting up the dull woodwork into a warmer orange-tinted yellow. Jessie sat drowned in a flood of golden light, the gloom of her black dress washed away for a passing moment, the rebelliously luxuriant hair which tried so hard to lie smooth under the spotless widow's cap, kindled into an almost fiery brilliancy.

While he spoke his passionate appeal David had drawn nearer and ever nearer, and when at length his voice ceased, he was so close to her chair that she could not have risen without brushing against him.

But she did not appear to be aware of it. For several moments after he had ceased to speak there came no change in her stiff attitude, and only when he said for the second time, more urgently, "Jessie, what is my answer?" she shivered, as though at a touch, and the fixity of her eyes began to relax. Then only she observed his close vicinity, and threw herself back in her chair with an almost horrified movement.

"No, no!" she cried, wildly. "Never, never! It can never be! His corpse lies between us; you can never take that away. Do you remember"—and suddenly her eyes grew wide again—"how white he looked when he lay on his back—how his black eye stared at the ceiling, and the blood"—she shuddered convulsively from head to foot—"how the water could not wash it away, how it always came back again?" She lifted her hand and stared at it with as horror-stricken eyes as though the purple stains with which the bramble-juice had dyed the tips of her fingers had been the blood she spoke of. "I shall see that spot always, always, and you want to talk to me of happiness? Ah, be merciful, and go away!"

Her face was bowed into her hands, while nervous shudders continued to shake her frame.

David stood by in momentary consternation, the heat of his own ardour chilled by bewilderment in face of an emotion too entirely feminine to be quite comprehensible to him. As he watched her anxiously and in silence, a recollection came into his mind.

"This is not right," he said, gravely, but with the infinite gentleness of tone and manner which the very incomprehensibility of her sensations awoke in him. "Once before I warned you that it cannot be good to give way to your impressions as entirely as this, to abandon yourself thus headlong even to just impulses. These ideas are nervous; if you do not fight against them they may become morbid. I would not have you callous, God forbid! But I would have you examine the case by the light of reason also, and not of sentiment alone."

She only shook her head obstinately, without looking up.

David watched her for a moment longer, then with a sigh stepped back.

"It is too soon," he said to himself. "I must give her more time."

"Jessie," he said, aloud, "I told you that I was ready to wait; well, I shall just wait a little longer."

"Waiting will make no difference," came back in a stifled whisper. "Waiting cannot undo what has been done, so it is no use."

"Yet you cannot forbid me to wait; now that I know that you love me, nothing shall keep me from it. You belong to me, Jessie, by your own avowal, and I shall win you yet."

"You shall never win me!" and she uncovered her deathly-pale face, in which her eyes flamed like green fire.

"Very well," and he managed to smile, for he was conscious principally of the necessity of not further exciting her just then. "We shall see who is stronger, you or I. You don't know how patient I can be, Jessie, but you shall learn."

"It is no use," she began; but he only said again—

"I shall wait."

CHAPTER V.

At the bottom of the stairs David met Monica, with her foot upon the first step, and the usual sweet serenity of her face disturbed by what he would have recognised as astonishment had he not been too absorbed to notice it.

"You were looking for me?"

"Yes, we are going; and you have been hunted for all over the house. Are you ready?" And she gave him a strangely keen glance.

"Quite," said David, trying to remember what his last words to Jessie had been; for, seeing that there had been no door between, only the open staircase, she could scarcely have failed to hear.

Nothing more was said as they crossed the open yard together. By the time they rejoined the others the astonishment was quite gone from Monica's face, and nothing remained to show that the last few minutes had been to her a revelation.

"You don't know how patient I can be, but you shall learn." It was not much more than this that she had heard; but taken in conjunction with that "Jessie" which had accompanied it, and with his sudden silence of yesterday, as well as many other almost unnoticed trifles, this scrap of a phrase had been enough to open her eyes.

At home she sat down to take the words to

pieces and to recompose them with the help of past events. They could not explain to her the whole mystery of David's life, since she believed his acquaintance with Jessie Alington to date from last summer only, when she herself had, as she supposed, made them acquainted for the first time, and yet they threw a light on many dark places. She had never forgotten that vehement denial he had made when taxed by her with his engagement, and had puzzled often over it, without reaching any satisfactory conclusion. Now she thought she understood. If he loved Jessie Alington, that assurance, "I shall never marry anybody—never!" became quite explicable, since Jessie Alington was then a married woman; and that he should have loved her, even at first sight, appeared to Monica, who never grudged to any other woman her mead of praise, perfectly credible. It is true that David's declaration had preceded by a few days his introduction to Lady Alington, and the recollection of this tiny circumstance would have sufficed to heighten Monica's perplexity instead of allaying it—but here her memory played her false. The two events had been so near, and the one so completely overshadowed the other, that she had lost sight of the exact order of precedence; for that declaration of David's had been a turning-point in her life, while his introduction to Lady Alington had appeared to be a quite unimportant circumstance. It was now only that it began to assume its right proportions.

So he loved her?—she could scarcely doubt it after those words overheard—and why speak of patience unless he meant to win her? That other

woman, then, if she had ever existed—that supposed lady-love, who had sent him to Australia—must after all have been forgotten. Was she glad of it or not? It was hard to say. In her own quiet way she had been as jealous of the other woman as she knew she would be forced to be of this one, and yet, on the whole, she would have almost preferred if he had remained true to his first love. Somehow it did not seem like David to transfer his allegiance so easily, nor even to outlive what must surely have been an exceptionally ardent passion.

He loved her—that much was clear, and she was free now; but did she love him? It would scarcely seem so from what had to-day evidently been a rejection. Had she ever loved him? Monica wondered, as she sat in her room long after dusk, with no candle lit and only two faint squares of light to mark where the windows were. Had that unhappy Sir Augustus ever suspected David's attachment, and did not this new discovery throw a certain light upon the catastrophe of last year, which, until now, had been a mystery by itself? A new perplexity fell on her spirit at the thought. In her solitude the strong Monica bowed her head into her hands and groaned aloud. She had not hoped for anything, and yet it appeared to her that she had just lost him over again. There are women whose vocation is renunciation, and Monica believed at last completely that she belonged to those.

But even renunciation has its weaknesses, and when a few days later Dr. Drummond quite casually mentioned his daughter's impending departure, Monica could not refrain from keeping a close watch upon David's face. There was not much to

be seen there, however. David had expected this, was even glad of it. He was at any rate determined to give her a space in which to calm down and reconsider her determination, and rather than meet her as a mere acquaintance he preferred not to meet her at all. The result of his first appeal had not seriously discouraged him. Though he had been confident of success he was quite well able to bear a defeat which it never occurred to him to consider as otherwise than temporary. Perhaps it had been over sanguine to have hoped for such quick hearing. Those excessive scruples which had come so near to making him despair in that agitated interview, now that he reviewed them closely and calmly, not only did not irritate him, but even to some extent pleased him. On consideration he found her attitude natural, just as her vehement behaviour on the day of Sir Augustus's death had appeared to him natural. His own point of view was different, but he was able to realise hers. Distasteful though the first check to his ardour had been, he would scarcely have had it otherwise, for what could be the worth of a woman who could quickly get over the horror of that catastrophe? He himself had been deeply shaken for long after; far too deeply to be able to realise that his long-deferred happiness lay now within his grasp. But in measure as the impression of that unhappy evening faded, common-sense had resumed the upper hand, as it was bound to do in a nature so typical of perfect health—both bodily and mental. He had shaken the shadow from him, and confident in the knowledge of his innocence, had claimed the prize. It had been foolish of him to forget that a woman's

mind is not a man's, that her self-accusations would be more subtle, in proportion that her imagination was more impressionable and her logic less robust, and would therefore need more time in which to lay themselves. Well, he would give it her. He had funds of patience within him, still unexhausted; he would begin to draw upon them anew, never doubting the ultimate result, for although time could not undo the thing that had been done, as she bitterly said, it could undo the impression, and that it was the impression that stood in his way, even more than the thing itself, he somewhat dimly guessed since the interview in the tannery. The words he had heard there would help him to wait, for until that day the avowal of love which she had hurled at him like an insult, over her husband's corpse, as it were, had been the only admission he had received from her.

So, with hope in his heart, he set himself to wait; first letting her leave St. Mallans without giving a sign, and then remaining quiescent for another month. At the end of that time he wrote to her, and briefly inquired whether she had reconsidered the resolution expressed to him at the last meeting, or at the very least would accord him another interview? Her answer came promptly. There was nothing to reconsider, she said; her resolution was irrevocable, and the interview could therefore have no object. At the close of the letter there occurred this phrase:

"It is only by devoting the rest of my life to work—real, serious work—that I can hope to regain my perfect peace of mind; at last I have found what may help me to atone for what has been."

"It is too early yet," said David to himself, as he folded up the paper. "Well, we are young—we can wait yet;" but there was a shade of wistfulness in his tone as he said it.

After this he became passive again for some months. Even after he had rejoined his regiment, which on its return from India had been quartered at Aldershot, he refrained from further attempts to change the situation. Time would work for him better than he could work for himself, as the canny Scotchman rightly understood. For long he did not even know whether Lady Alington were at Allwood or in town. This ignorance was enlightened on a peculiarly dismal January day.

His father had written to him concerning an old servant who was supposed to be dying in a London hospital, asking him to verify the case, and accordingly David had made a run to town for the purpose. He had reached the hospital only to be told that the woman had been buried two days ago, and having more time on his hands than he had bargained for, he had taken a fancy for returning on foot through these regions of poverty-stricken alleys, of patched window-panes, and baby-encumbered doorways—which were as strange to him as though they lay at a hundred miles from London. And yet it was not an alluring day for a stroll. A dense, brown fog had been slowly descending for an hour past, and now hung at about the height of the first storey windows, compact as a ceiling, under which the dimly seen figures moved as though in a badly lighted room, and with a certain apprehensive sense of hurry and many glances up-

wards, as though to ask whether the dingy ceiling was not coming down.

At the mouth of an unusually uninviting alley David was momentarily checked by an unusually thick knot of ragged urchins, the unison of whose piping voices, shrill with hunger and insolence, seemed to proclaim some common object of clamour. A cat probably, thought David, as he skirted the juvenile crowd, or else a frozen sparrow, and he was on the point of going on his way when over the red and black and brown unkempt heads he caught sight of a dark, tall figure, and instantly stood still. So it was a woman, and not a cat—this required some looking to. To judge from the tone of these thinly piping voices she could be in no over-pleasant position, and to pass by without seeing whether his assistance was wanted, would at least be uncharitable. Without a word David began to let his elbows play upon the grimy ears and tattered shoulders of the miniature crowd, whose cries he now began to distinguish as semi-dérivative and semi-imploring. The woman, dressed in black and thickly veiled, had her arms encumbered with several unwieldy parcels, as David now perceived.

"I'll carry 'em for three cawpers!" shrieked one of the tender-aged rabble, thrusting out two hands as lean and grasping as the claws of some hungry hawk towards the parcels.

"Three cawpers, 'ndeed!" yelled a yet shriller voice. "Tuppence 'apeny is what I'll do it fur! Sich a beautiful lidy 'ud never think of carryin' them bleed'n pussels hussell—an' with fur on her clawk, too—reel catskin, I'll bet," and a tongue

clucked audibly. "Ye're far too daylicat to carry 'em besides."

"And cheat us out of our cawpers—t'ud be as bad as stealin'—come, lidy, jist divide 'em fairly atween us," and more greedy hands were stretched out, even on to her arms.

"Beautiful lidy!"

"Kind lidy!"

It was at this moment that David succeeded in forcing his passage, an event that was followed by a sudden lull in the shrill tempest and an equally sudden dropping of hands. The dimness of the atmosphere was so great that it was not until he had looked the stranger close in the face that he recognised Jessie. She was evidently both frightened and angry, for though her face appeared a little white, her eyes flashed like green stars through the thickness of her veil.

"Lady Alington!" he said aloud, in his astonishment.

She turned her startled eyes upon him.

"Yes, it's me," she said, hurriedly. "Can you help me to get out of here? They won't let me pass."

"But how do you come——?"

"Never mind; I will tell you afterwards. Only send those boys away."

Most of them were gone already. The appearance of a muscular man instead of only a beautiful lady, had so altered the aspect of affairs as not to make it worth while to stay. It was only the most sanguine that still lingered.

The situation was easy enough to grasp. The alley, being a *cul de sac*, had no egress but this one,

and the boys had attempted to lay the carrier of parcels under contribution by the simple process of blocking it.

"They meant no harm, I daresay," said Jessie, recovering herself, "but I won't be bullied into giving up my parcels. Only last week I had one stolen that way."

"But you will give them to me," said David, beginning to take them out of her cramped and chilled fingers, without waiting for leave. One of the wrappings had come undone, perhaps under the clutch of one of the would-be carriers, and he caught sight of the sleeve of a coarse flannel jacket.

"And now you will let me get you a cab."

"But I have another house to go to——"

"Not to-day; you look quite cold and tired enough already, and besides the fog is coming down."

"These flannel jackets——"

"Must wait till another day. Only I should advise you not to come alone next time."

"I never do; it is the first time, and only by accident. Mr. Brownley was to have met me here. I suppose something prevented him."

"Who is Mr. Brownley?"

"The clergyman under whom I work."

"He should not expose you to such disagreeables as this," said David, a little sharply, and at the same time he remembered that closing passage in her letter to which he had not at the moment given much thought.

They were moving towards the end of the alley and almost alone now. The promise of a sixpence

to whoever should first bring a cab having successfully dispersed the last remnants of the crowd.

"Can he not distribute his flannel jackets himself?"

"He does far more difficult things than that, and I have never had disagreeables before."

They walked on in silence for a few moments.

"Here is a cab," said David, presently, for the sixpence had worked a miracle.

Jessie stood still and looked about her rather uncertainly.

"What are you waiting for?" asked David. "There will be another crowd in a moment, and a grown-up one this time."

"Mr. Brownley—he will not know what has become of me."

"Just as you do not know what has become of him; it is tit for tat. It is his own look-out for not keeping his appointment. Let me help you in, Lady Alington."

Rather to her own astonishment Jessie obeyed. He had taken the command of the situation so completely as a matter of course that resistance seemed out of the question, and besides it was true that she felt both tired and cold. There was something of relief in being ordered to rest. She therefore got in, and he got in after her—also, it would seem, as a matter of course.

They had barely taken their places when a sort of plaintive shout was heard close at hand, and the descending curtain of fog was divided first by a very badly rolled up umbrella and then by a long, spare figure with flying coat-tails and a preternaturally tall hat.

"Lady Alington! Lady Alington!" panted the high-pitched, plaintive voice.

"It is Mr. Brownley," said Jessie, half rising from her place.

As she spoke a long, anxious face peered in at the side, a face which David had seen before, and which, although he could not immediately identify it, he recognised at once as being connected with some disagreeable memory. It was only later on that he remembered that this was one of the two brother clergymen who had formed part of that bevy of visitors whose presence had been such a trial on the day of his leave-taking last year.

"Lady Alington, how will you ever forgive me for being late? But, you understand—a sudden call——"

"Lady Alington understands perfectly," said David, before Jessie had been able to speak. "It is the flannel jackets you are wanting, is it not? Here they are—I yield them up with pleasure." And without further warning, he promptly transferred the four or five parcels he held to the arms which Mr. Brownley had convulsively outstretched, as though to detain the parting helper. "Lady Alington is going home, she is too much knocked up to do anything more to-day. Forward, there!" and before another word had been uttered, Mr. Brownley found himself standing alone on the pavement, clasping to his flat breast the paper packets which he had mechanically received, and trying vainly to pierce the thickening fog in the direction in which the hansom had departed. The glimpse of his astounded face had been so irresistible that Jessie herself could not quite forbear a short, quickly sup-

pressed laugh, a gleam of fun which for one passing moment recalled the girlish high spirits of other days.

"That was surely rather unkind," she reproachfully remarked, quickly composing herself.

"He brought it on his own head. A laggard deserves no mercy, and he has proved himself a laggard."

"He is a saint," said Jessie, quickly.

David threw a sharp side-glance at her face.

"Perhaps, but with an imperfect idea of punctuality."

When the hansom stood still before the house in Forest Place, Jessie got out in silence, and David, also in silence, first helped her out and then, after what appeared to be a momentary hesitation, followed her up the steps. Jessie had not invited him to enter, but also she had not said good-night, and perhaps the consciousness of this tacit leave sufficed him. Having reached the lighted drawing-room—the same room in which their parting had taken place last summer—some more moments passed without anything being said. Both were busy with the past, yet both keenly aware of the present. Jessie, busied with divesting herself of her wraps and laying them on a distant sofa, did not let him see her face immediately, and seemed purposely to be ignoring his presence. When at last she moved slowly back towards him her features were composed, but somewhat hard-set.

"Thank you," was the first word David said, and he said it with a certain solemnity, looking her steadily in the face.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"For not forbidding me to follow you. It is the first time I have been in this room since—I left England; may there be a second time, Jessie?"

She frowned at the last word. "Not if you call me Jessie. I cannot accept you as——"

"A suitor? I understand. But you can accept me as a friend?"

She stood before him, rolling the end of a black ribbon round her finger, and obviously hesitating. "If I could feel sure that you would never talk to me again as you spoke last time, at St. Mallans, if I could hope that you were beginning to see the matter as I see it—to be convinced——"

"Perhaps you might convince me," suggested David, with a wiliness of which he never would have believed himself capable.

She glanced at him quickly, and a little doubtfully.

"Perhaps; you must give me time to reflect." And her fingers played more feverishly with the ribbon.

Having watched her for a moment, David came to a resolution.

"Listen to me, Lady Alington—I have a proposition to make. I am not going to promise never again to speak to you as I spoke at St. Mallans, for that would be dishonest of me—but I propose to you a bargain, or rather a truce. If you let me come here it shall be on your own conditions. For, so long as I do not importune you with what you know to be my one wish, you will allow me to be a visitor. On the day when I speak to you of love you have the right to forbid me your door. Do you agree?"

"I would rather you gave the promise," she began, with the struggle of her soul clearly written on her face.

"That I cannot do—unless, indeed, you succeed in convincing me that you are right and I am wrong."

"I will try," said Jessie, slowly.

"Then you agree?"

"Yes, I agree. I suppose there is no reason why we should not be friends."

David knew of a great many reasons why they could never be friends, but remained wisely silent. He was also wise enough to make this first visit, during which he felt himself accepted on trial, as it were, remarkably short, and to talk of the most general topics procurable. He had his reward in seeing the constraint gradually melting from his hostess's manner, and a little of the old naturalness return.

"I suppose I, too, ought to say thank you," she remarked at parting. "You got me out of a very disagreeable position to-day. I don't mind telling you that I really was in a funk. Only"—and a shadow fell on her face—"it was a mistaken service, after all. I should not have let you persuade me to interrupt my work. Mr. Brownley will think me terribly lax. I shall have to make up for the wasted day to-morrow."

A new expression came over her face as she spoke—a dilation of the eyes, an eager parting of the lips, a slight yet unmistakable transfiguration of the features, which made her a degree more beautiful, and yet impressed painfully, as does everything which ever so slightly touches the border of exaggeration.

It was the recollection of that look which David carried away with him as the final impression of his visit ; it threw a shadow even on the very real satisfaction he felt at having made what he believed to be a step towards his goal.

CHAPTER VI.

DAVID began by making a very discreet use of the leave accorded him; a visit in every ten days or fortnight being about all that he felt it wise to indulge in. Even this was enough to give him full insight into the abrupt and almost violent alteration which had taken place in Jessie Alington's whole individuality as well as mode of life—if, indeed, it was an alteration, and not rather the development by circumstances of qualities that had always lain in her nature. He learned now that she had been in town all winter. The heir to the entail, a distant cousin already provided with a comfortable home of his own, had left the house at Alington entirely at her personal disposal, but she did not mean to make much use of the concession, preferring to be near to her self-chosen work. Fashionable times of the year had ceased to exist for her, since she had shaken from her all those social obligations which, even in her more thoughtless days, had been irksome to her freedom-loving nature. The life she now led, like the garments she wore, approached austerity. The idea of an atonement being necessary had taken complete possession of her mind, and, as usual, was acted up to with something like intemperance. If she had had her whole will, it is

not unlikely that sackcloth and ashes would have been her choice.

Very soon David had recognised the case completely, but without despairing. It was folly, of course, but a noble sort of folly; something to be smiled at, perhaps, but yet to be treated tenderly while it lasted.

There was one element only in the question which seriously irritated him, and that element was Mr. Brownley. On the occasion already of his second visit in Forest Place he found the long-backed figure installed in the drawing-room, and deep in what appeared to be a confidential conversation with Lady Alington. It was the "work" they were talking about, of course, and what irritated David most of all was to perceive that the man actually was in earnest about his work; without this he never could have attained the influence which he evidently exercised over Jessie's ardent but intrinsically honest spirit. The eager crack in the over-strained voice which came in towards the end of his excited harangues was unmistakable as was the feverish light in the small, sunken grey eyes. David recognised its meaning all the more easily for being capable of enthusiasm himself. But worst of all it was to see a reflection of that half-fanatical gleam flaring up at moments in Jessie's own eyes, transforming her in that painfully beautiful way which he had marked on the day of their meeting. David, like most men of strong self-confidence, was constitutionally almost free of jealousy, and besides it was impossible to be jealous of a man with that length of backbone and that cut of coat-tails; but he would scarcely have been quite

human if to see this individual occupying so large a part in Jessie's life—even only as an instrument—had not become daily more distasteful. Sometimes on his entrance he would find two long-backed men, instead of one, either holding breathless discussions, or else eagerly bending over lists and patterns of blanketing, for Mr. Brownley had an adjutant in the person of his younger brother, who was only a trifle shorter in the waist, as well as in the breath, and therefore more given to listening to the harangues than uttering them, but with the same aggressive spark in the same tiny grey eyes. Even the coarse, hard-threaded flannel, with the stitching of which he nowadays always found Jessie occupied, instead of the dainty embroidery of other times, had as irritating an effect on David's nerves as it may be supposed to have had on the wearers' skins, for the very look of it conjured up in his spirit the figures of the brother-apostles, even though not present in the flesh. If he had been able, in his secret heart, to laugh outright at the grotesque pair of figures, it would have been easier to put up with them, but this was exactly what he could not do, being too sincere a man himself not to honour sincerity wherever he might meet it, as well as the rare quality of perfect devotion. And yet, despite this grudging admiration, he was likewise too human himself to forget that saints also are human, and instinctively he kept a close watch on the elder and more dominant brother, shrewdly suspecting that Jessie, in her blind eagerness, was exposing herself to a danger of which not a thought had yet disturbed her. It seemed to himself well-nigh impossible that this constant contact with the

beautiful widow should be productive of nothing beyond charitable emotions. Quietly and keenly he watched, almost certain that the moment must come.

And really it did come, though not quite as soon as he had looked for it.

Winter was blossoming into spring by this time, and town was full again, not only of starving slum inhabitants, but also of the dwellers in palaces. The houses to the right and to the left of the Alington mansion woke out of their winter sleep, without Jessie even appearing to notice it, and with only this difference in her habits that she now stitched at linen instead of at flannel. On a certain April afternoon David had found Mr. Brownley with Jessie, and had outstayed him, and now was sitting silent, deeply reflecting on something he had seen in the latter's glittering eyes in the moment of touching Lady Alington's hand at parting, and which had certainly *not* been Christian zeal, or at least not Christian zeal alone.

"You are very silent to-day," said Jessie, looking across at him with a little inquiring smile.

In the midst of his irritation it had been a compensation to him to notice that during these months of purely friendly intercourse there would come moments, more especially when they were alone, in which the tension of nerves, in which she now habitually lived, relaxed just enough to let her former self reappear. He had always been conscious of possessing a certain soothing influence on her excitable spirit, and no doubt she had gradually become reassured by his manner, for he had faithfully kept his part of the bargain so far. As

for the idea of converting him to her point of view on the momentous question of their relations, to which he had partly owed his entry to the house, it seemed to have been lost sight of, or more probably it had been found on closer examination to accord badly with the theory of his visiting here as a mere acquaintance, big with danger, in fact, to the present peaceful *status quo*.

"What are you thinking of?"

"Of Mr. Brownley," said David, curtly.

"You could not think of anything more improving, at any rate. I believe you are beginning to admire him almost as much as I do."

"And to observe him as well."

"With the object of imitation, I hope?"

"No, that would be rather superfluous, considering that it was I who showed him the way."

"You? Oh, Captain Ellis! I am sure you are not uncharitable, but have you ever devoted even a whole day to your fellow-creatures?"

"Not in the plural, perhaps, but I was thinking of the singular just now."

"Please explain."

"May I do so a little brutally?"

"If you can't do it any other way; but remember that he is an apostle."

"Well, what I meant to say is this: that apostle is in love with you, Lady Alington."

Jessie dropped her work to her knees and looked at him indignantly and for a moment speechlessly.

"This is unworthy of you," she said at last, with magnificently flashing eyes which did not fall before his. "As if a man of that stamp ever would

think of me at all—whose whole soul is filled with his work. He is not a man at all, but a worker.”

“That can’t prevent his seeing that you are a woman.”

“I am a fellow-worker—that is all.”

“A beautiful one, do not forget. I think I am an old enough friend to be allowed to say so,” he quickly added, warned by her face.

She took up her work again hastily, flushing hotly over neck and forehead.

“No, no,” she said, with vehemence, “you do not grasp his principles. Oh, Captain Ellis, how cruel, how unjust of you!”

“Perhaps I don’t grasp his principles, but I do grasp my sex,” said David, unmoved. “I did not mean to convince you, only to warn you. I don’t blame him—God forbid! I sympathise with him,” and he stifled a sigh that was about to rise, “but I think it would do no harm if you managed to remember that there are certain weaknesses which are common both to apostles and to sinners.”

Though many more words were burning on his tongue, he went away without having said anything more—anything which might not have accorded well with the *rôle* of sober, though privileged friend.

The climax of the episode was even nearer than he had supposed. On the occasion of his very next visit he almost ran against Mr. Brownley in the doorway, and in making way for him had a good look at his face, during which he noticed that he was not recognised, and also that the aggressively tall hat was sitting at a very peculiar angle.

In the drawing-room he found Jessie walking

up and down, her hands clasped behind her back, her work on the floor. One look at her face cleared up whatever might still have been doubtful about the situation.

"I was right, was I not?" he asked, without reflection, for he had instantly seen that the state she was in made pretences impossible.

She turned a hot and agitated face upon him.

"Yes, you were right," she said, with a certain haughty sharpness even in the midst of her disturbance. "Though how you guessed it I cannot imagine, since I swear that, until you spoke the other day, I never had the faintest suspicion. He is a man, after all, and not a saint as I supposed. To think that I should have seen him on his knees outside a church! I have never had such a shock in my life—Oh, traitor! traitor!"

And, flinging herself on to the nearest chair, she pressed her hand over her eyes, as though to shut out the vision.

"This is surely going too far," said David, with his usual moderation, yet not without a pleasant sense of satisfaction at the words he had just heard. "Not being a saint doesn't mean being a traitor. It only argues that he is human, and I accused him of nothing worse, as you will remember."

"But I didn't want him to be human," cried Jessie, with the petulance of a spoilt child. "I only wanted the support of his zeal, of his convictions. I thought he had wings on his shoulders to keep him above the earth, and now this fall into the mud!"

She began to laugh to herself a little hysterically.

"Oh, if you could have seen him on the carpet! His coat-tails actually trailed, and his boots! It was the most hopeless comedy——"

"I have no doubt that Mr. Brownley would do very thoroughly whatever he undertakes," observed David guardedly, his fancy tickled in spite of himself by the picture suggested.

"Horribly thoroughly. But if you have come here to laugh at me——" said Jessie, suddenly dropping her hand, and looking at him with a return of anger.

"To laugh at you? Oh Jessie!"

It was the first time he had spoken the forbidden word since the day he had accompanied her home, but he had no thought now of taking it back. For a few moments he was silent, making a last stand against himself, then, having recognised the uselessness of the battle, went on speaking quickly.

"I can bear this no longer, Jessie. Why should other men be free to say what I may not say? Why should I alone be shut out from even daring to speak? I have had enough of our bargain—I will hold to it no longer. This is what I have to say. Enough of these false pretences, enough of this sham friendship. You know what brings me here, you know what I want, and I shall go on asking for it until I get it. I have looked on long enough at that priest resting his eyes on you—and there will come others. I will look on no longer. Whether you listen to me or not, I will speak what I have to say."

Jessie had laid her hand again over her eyes, and when he ceased speaking she remained silent.

"Is there no chance for me yet, Jessie?" he asked, more gently.

She only shook her head. Indeed she was trembling so violently that she could not have spoken immediately. The scene that was just passed had shaken her far more than she herself was aware, and now this unexpected attack on the top of it! But even in the depths of her wretchedness she never thought of succumbing.

"What do you mean to do with the rest of your life?"

"To work," she muttered, unsteadily.

"But not at this fever pitch? It is simply madness. Work that is overdone cannot last long. Have you thought of that?"

"That cannot matter; at least I will have done my best to atone."

"For what? You still hold to the theory of your guilt?"

"Of mine and of yours. I wish—oh, how I wish—I could convince you!"

"I doubt whether you would succeed, but you have my leave to try. I gave you leave long ago—don't you remember?"

"Yes, it is true," said Jessie, thoughtfully.

"But you never tried. Supposing you do so now?" Anything that could defer his sentence of banishment seemed acceptable at that moment.

"Not to-day; my ideas are too much mixed up to-day."

From which David inferred that, although he had openly broken their bargain, he was not yet to be forbidden the house.

On the strength of this inference he boldly pre-

sented himself again, and found the door open. That suggestion about his possible conversion had been luckier than even he was aware of, since it gave to Jessie something to lay hold of as a pretext for still receiving him—something wherewith to justify herself in her own eyes. In the first moment she had snatched at it instinctively, as the only alternative to indignation; but as with returning calmness she began to penetrate further into the idea, the advantages became more apparent. To bring David to a recognition of his own guilt and hers—and through this to renunciation—would not only be part of the atonement to which she had devoted her life, but also the only means of making a friendship between them possible. And without some such friendship she did not see how she could move onwards on the thorny path she had chosen, grown infinitely more difficult to tread because of Mr. Brownley's defection. The second Mr. Brownley indeed remained; but he was too like his brother, and also perhaps too eager to help, to be quite acceptable. Jessie, having conceived a sudden mistrust of that particular shade of grey eyes, instinctively shrank from him. The disillusionment had been so great that it took her some time to get back her mental balance, and while groping around her for support, it was almost unavoidable that her hand should encounter David's. If only she could win him to her views, make him a helper instead of a hinderer, how much easier her task would be! David, who had hoped that the clergyman's collapse would bring about a more complete reaction, watched her mood with a certain disappointment. Her convictions were evidently too deep-seated to

be uprooted by a mere accident. Mr. Brownley had only been an incident, though a mortifying one, and having recovered from it, she went on her way again.

Their relations now entered into a new phase. Animated discussions took the place of the friendly but strictly general talks of the past months. To confound David arguments it was obviously necessary to hear them, and therefore impossible to forbid him to speak his word. Closely and conscientiously the subject was examined, each, as it were, turning their opposite lights upon it—one as anxious as the other to secure the victory to his views. Even the name of the dead man, which at first each had instinctively refrained from speaking, was now often said between them! The word "crime," which ever again returned to Jessie's lips, would sometimes provoke David to a sharper retort.

"Yes," he would say, "I agree with that, but the crime is not where you look for it. You *are* guilty towards that unhappy man, but not because you killed him. It was when you married him that you sinned against him. The consent you gave him then was a sin against the sacredness of love, a treason to yourself, a treason to *me*, since I am the man whom you were destined to love. That was your first sin; your second would be to refuse me compensation for that first loss."

"Because it was wrong to marry him, that cannot make it right to have made a victim of him."

"He was a victim of his own groundless suspicions, of the inherent mistrust of his unfortunate disposition."

"You must not slight him," said Jessie, quickly.

She had slighted him in thought far beyond this while he was alive, but now that he was dead her conscience had grown too tender to allow of even a hint of contempt.

"I am not slighting him. He loved you truly, and that is enough for me to honour him. I am only analysing the causes. I do not think that even in my most secret thoughts I ever contemplated his death as a reasonable possibility—far less wished for it."

"It remains, nevertheless, true that we should profit by it—if I listened to you."

"By the guiding of Providence, not of our own."

"Of our own, of our own!" she would eagerly argue. "If I had left London when I discovered that I cared for you, that mistake would never have been made."

"Then some other mistake would have been made. You were not living in a cloister. Some day he would have come and found you shaking hands with some other man, and would have jumped to the same conclusion. Poor Sir Augustus condemned himself to death when he married you, since he did not believe enough in himself to be able to believe in you."

It was there that lay the weakness of her case, as Jessie darkly felt, and therefore this was a point which she preferred to evade instead of arguing.

"Ah, but it can't be right that we should owe our happiness to his unfortunate disposition, that our life should be built upon his death, that his blood should be upon our betrothal? Ah, think of it—think of it!—you know it can never be! You

know that he lies between us—that if I dared to belong to you his spectre would always stand by my side!”

And in the vividness of her recollections her eyes would widen and her cheeks would pale, as, influenced by the hope of converting her fellow-sinner, the words crowded from her lips.

In such moments David would answer nothing, not only because in the very teeth of his cool common-sense her words were apt to impress, and even momentarily to stagger him, but also because there was nothing that he could answer. Just as the strength of his case lay in argument, so the strength of hers lay in a sentiment, which being intangible and wholly individual he recognised as unassailable by arguments.

“It will pass,” he said to himself time after time; but the discussions followed each other without it showing signs of passing, and apparently without modifying either of their points of view. London had grown full and then again empty without either of them noticing it. Without Jessie being clearly aware of it David’s visits had again, as once before, become the pivot around which her life turned. The curious warfare she now led with him absorbed her interest; even his absence was filled with the search for arguments that were to convince him, but always failed. As time went on the heat died out of these arguments; it had come to be a chronic arrangement, a frank and almost amicable warfare—he purposely moderate, in order not to frighten her off, she never denying her love, but never by a word admitting it as a valid reason *for yielding*. Little by little her old self was re-

appearing in her face and manner; a certain moderation had entered into her work which yet she clung to as to a safeguard, while that painfully brilliant light returned ever more rarely to her eyes. Fever cannot last long in any shape; but when David, deriving hope from these symptoms, attempted to press his advantage, it was only to meet a repulse as determined as on the first day.

At rare moments only would impatience take the upper hand, and his ever repeated cry of: "We are innocent—why should we not be happy?" gained a sharper tone. At moments, too, a sort of inward rage would make him long to tear from her head that hated cap which seemed the badge of eternal widowhood, but as yet he had always succeeded in mastering himself. One startled glance, one word of appeal to his forbearance, had been enough to bring back moderation to his tone and a forced calm to his features.

Autumn passed once more into winter, and winter into spring, without bringing about any outward alteration in their respective positions. David had rightly said that his patience was great, but he had not really known that it was so great as this. If he had not believed that she loved him he would have despaired long ago, but that doubt had not yet come to him.

With the exception of short visits to Allwood, Jessie spent her time entirely in London. It brought her near to her work, as she told herself, though it was true that it also brought her near to Aldershot. In this third year of her mourning her crape was as deep as ever and her life as retired, and she had still found no better way of laying the

vision of that dead husband whose blood-stained corpse seemed to her for ever to lie between her and the man she loved—an impediment which would never be overcome. Even at this distance of time she could still see the very shape of the blood-stain on his forehead, the very angle at which his one eye had been so horribly screwed towards the ceiling, all the minutest details of his appearance and position. Indeed, though she did not know it, it was the details that were the real obstacle here, for it was her senses, even more than her imagination, which from their hypersensitiveness had such difficulty in shaking off an impression. If she had never seen the corpse of her husband, but only heard of his suicide, she could much more easily have thought of marrying David; it was the details she could not get rid of.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER year trailed slowly by, and David was still waiting.

But he had come to have moments of discouragement, and passing attacks of restlessness which were growing more difficult to master. At times it seemed to him that he was doomed to go on waiting thus until both their heads were grey, and at other times—far harder to bear—the increasing moral weariness of this fruitless warfare would weigh upon him to the point of making him almost ready to subscribe to Jessie's arguments. What if she were right, after all? he would ask himself then. Being morally—even though only casually—responsible for Sir Augustus's death, did not a moral law forbid them ever to enjoy the fruits of that death? At these moments the future would appear to him very empty, and the past very pointless; but they never were of long duration. His mind was too robustly sane to be deluded for any length of time, and common-sense would always end by re-asserting itself.

In the fourth spring since the death of Jessie's husband, the visits to Forest Place were interrupted by a summons to the north, a joyful summons, though, although coming as suddenly as though it had been one of woe. Jean and Meg had somehow

or other, despite their freckles and their seclusion, managed to pick up a lover apiece—and simultaneously, too, as ever since the day on which they had both cut their first tooth, it had been their habit to do things—not particularly eligible lovers, it is true, since one of them had far too few pounds, and the other far too few years, to make promising husbands; but Mr. Ellis, whose trust in Providence was as boundless as his sympathy with youth and foolishness, had been either coaxed or bullied into giving a double consent—upon which David was urgently requested to make use of the Easter holidays in order to become acquainted with his future brothers-in-law. To think that Meg and Jean were actually of an age to take husbands! How time was passing, to be sure!

The appeal of course was irresistible, even to David's present state of mind, and the first April days saw him in his old home.

Once there, however, it appeared to him that he was not nearly so much wanted as had appeared in the letters. Jean and Meg were both far too deeply absorbed in their billing and cooing to have time to do more than proudly to introduce their wooers, while Mr. Ellis, arduously divided between parish work and somewhat desperate calculations as to the sums necessary for setting up two new households, had to content himself generally with smiling at his son over his balance-sheets, and snatching a talk with him of an evening.

The two new brothers-in-law were as different from each other as their brides-elect were alike—one being a little too old for his *fiancée*, and the other a little too young; one a model of soberness,

abhorring flippancy as he would poison—the sort of man who sits down carefully in the middle of his chair, and conscientiously scrapes his boots on the smallest provocation; the other a scatterbrained creature, who never thought of shutting a door, or stamping out a match, or uncocking his gun. And, by an odd arrangement, it was the young one to whom the portion of soberness had been allotted, and the elderly one whose recklessness made his friends tremble daily for his safety. Without this unusual distribution of qualities it is probable that both the youthfulness of the one and the mature age of the other would have proved greater stumbling-blocks than they did; for the gravity of demeanour seemed to add years to the suitor of twenty, while the very absence of this gravity took off at least as many years to the aspirer of forty. Besides his gravity the junior candidate possessed a tiny income, to help condone his youth, while the elder had only a vast fund of good-humour and his somewhat happy-go-lucky geniality to recommend him.

David was vaguely conscious of taking to them both, despite their unseasonable qualities; but he was conscious likewise of not being able to feel a close enough interest in his sisters' very evident happiness. He had even some difficulty in distinguishing the two chosen ones—not in their persons, *that* was easy enough—but in the matter of distributing them rightfully. He was constantly getting into disgrace for assigning Mr. Saunders to Jean, and Mr. Airlie to Meg, who each indignantly disclaimed the honour, each being in fact privately of opinion that her sister had made a quite mistaken

choice. It was Jean who was to marry the young man, and Meg the elder one, and naturally the very qualities which recommended her betrothed in her eyes made each look unfavourably on her future brother-in-law.

"How Jean can look so delighted at the prospect of passing her life with that walking-stick, I can't imagine," Meg would confide to her brother at odd moments. "I don't say he isn't a good sort of man, but I could never stand such wooden manners. It would be such a relief if he only would put his legs on the table, or drop his napkin, or behave a little more like other people, and I think that if I once heard him swear I could almost embrace him."

And on the next occasion Jean would take David aside to make him remark on the extraordinary want of method in Mr. Airlie's manner. "I am really afraid for Meg," she said, with a sigh, "he is sure to set fire to the house some day. I do like a man to be steady."

But since each was satisfied with her bargain what could it matter? And not only this, but each in her secret heart was vastly delighted that the other had got what she wanted, since it was so much easier to be happy together, instead of alone.

"They're both first-rate fellows in their way," was Mr. Ellis' lenient verdict; "and each is as fond of his girl as he can be. I don't really see why they should not be happy."

"What are they to live upon?" asked David, whose trust in Providence was somewhat more modified by worldly wisdom than was his father's.

"On love, to a great extent, no doubt," said Mr.

Ellis, softly. "They have plenty of that, to judge from appearances; and then that isn't all—you mustn't think me quite without foresight. Thomas (that was Mr. Saunders) will be in orders soon, and even now he has a hundred a year of his own; and John has had the offer of a very good appointment as manager of the Kirkfellie works. He lost his last situation unfortunately because of having left the safe open, which was consequently robbed."

"I am afraid he will leave several more safes open before he is done with it," remarked David, drily.

"Perhaps; but Meg is so steady herself, that I fancy she'll act as a check. And you must remember that neither she nor Jean are accustomed to luxury in any shape, and they're not likely to have many chances, not being good-looking. Really I do believe that I have done well in consenting."

And Mr. Ellis looked somewhat apprehensively into his son's face, as though begging pardon for having made his children happy.

"Ah well! they will have had their way, and that means a good deal," said David, with a sudden sigh whose sharpness surprised himself, and he went thoughtfully from the presence of the old father whose own lifelong struggles had apparently not taught him a sharp enough lesson, and in whom hunger had not succeeded in crushing out of his heart the belief that for two young people to be fond of each other is after all the best thing in life.

Love? Yes, they would certainly have that to fall back upon, David told himself, as he wandered out into the garden, and felt the April wind full in

his face. Spring had come late this year—late and suddenly. The after-winter had been of unusual tenacity, having seemingly begun its work all over again after only a brief respite, and with an icy hand forcing back all the life that would already be stirring. But as the delay had been long, so was the transformation abrupt. All over Scotland the people had awakened one morning, and see! the world that had been an old man yesterday, with hoary hair and hard-frozen wrinkles, the world was young again, and wept and laughed like an infant in a cradle of budding green.

In the little stone-enclosed garden behind the Manse the gooseberry-bushes had made their first move in their yearly warfare with the east wind, by boldly putting out their sharp little green buds into its very face; on the hillsides the single ragged thorn-bushes, which did duty for the forests of other days, were decked with buds as white and round as though they had been pearls strung upon rough black strings, and in the more deep-lying lanes the little brown fern fronds were crowding out of the banks. Up here in the exposed upland the wind scarcely ever went to rest, and scarcely ever lost its sting; but it tasted no longer of snow, and it brought on its acrid breath a suggestion of sprouting primroses, as well as of the distant sea, where the wild samphire would be streaking the shores with its crude young green. Not a balmy breeze, by any means, nor was it advisable to expose oneself to its caresses for long without a stout plaid on one's shoulders; nothing of that luxuriously perfumed heaviness which they in the south were enjoying, but quite as intoxicating in its way,

our northern spring, quite as well calculated to set a man a-dreaming, and better perhaps to stir the pulses and make chronic emotions acute. It is not only under early roses and flowering orange trees that hearts are apt to find hearts at this season, and in chilly climes as well as in mild ones it is well known that, astride upon the first swallow, Cupid loves to arrive.

At whatever hour David attempted to enter the garden he was certain to stumble upon one of the two couples, enjoying themselves after their own fashion—and their fashions seemed remarkably alike considering their contrast of character—the principal difference being that Mr. Saunders generally had a plaid and Mr. Airlie had none, also that Jean and her lover were generally found established in the wooden summer-house, while not infrequently Mr. Airlie was to be seen insecurely balanced on an overturned wheelbarrow, and once even was discovered on his knees on an undeniably damp path.

A hasty retreat was all that was open to David on these occasions, and such accidents having occurred several times, he took to avoiding the garden. Not only was it unpleasant to feel in the way, but also he discovered that there was something distinctly irritating, either to his nerves or to something else within him in these meetings. The restlessness which he had been aware of all winter seemed to be curiously aggravated by the sight of Mr. Saunders' arm round Jean's waist, or of Mr. Airlie playing with Meg's hand.

But even the avoidance of the garden did not spare him these sights, for there came rainy days on which the house itself was not safe, proving itself

far too limited in space for the accommodation of two enamoured couples. From having taken too little interest in his sisters' happiness David now began to feel a too painful interest, to watch the faces of the young and of the elderly lover, and to wonder what it must feel like to be as happy as they were.

"I am not sure whether we shall not be having a third marriage in the family," remarked Mr. Ellis, one day, having done reading a letter from his sister. He did not say it joyfully though, and with a sigh that extinguished the smile. A third marriage in the family was indeed the desire of his heart, but not in the form it seemed likely to take. Any day on which David had announced his engagement to Monica, Mr. Ellis' cup of happiness would have been full; but he had wellnigh given up that hope, as he had given up trying to understand his son. And now it appeared that Monica had got a new suitor of wonderful eligibility, whom Mrs. M'Farrel was making vigorous efforts to secure, and whom, as she confided to her brother, she had hopes of persuading Monica to accept.

"I dare say we shall see her married before the year is out," Mr. Ellis said, tentatively, watching the impression on his son meanwhile. But all that David said was: "I hope she will get a good husband; she deserves one, if ever woman did." He said it with perfect equanimity, and yet the news had made a certain indirect impression, although not the one which the father looked for.

So Monica, too, was making her choice! Was not every one and everything mating around him, from his nearest family members to the sparrows

on the roof and the cockchafers in the garden! The news just heard seemed somehow to increase his loneliness—the sense of being “out of it,” of being obliged to stand aside and look on at other people being happy.

There came a day at last—a particularly blue-skied day, particularly full of twitterings and flutterings, and almost, it would seem, of the gentle snap of opening buds—which brought about a sort of crisis. All the juices in the world seemed stirring, and something which for long had been moving in David's veins became on this day unmanageable. On the evening before he had, against his will, had the opportunity of observing exactly how long Mr. Saunders took to give a kiss to Meg, or Jean—he never could remember which of the two was his rightful property—and had slept badly in consequence. Jammed in between the water-butt and the wall, where a sudden halt in their brilliant but somewhat chilly moonlight walk had surprised him, he had been placed before the choice of either overcoming them with confusion by announcing his presence, or else holding his breath and remaining invisible. Perhaps out of regard for their feelings he had selected the latter course. It is true that, besides holding his breath, he also had the choice of shutting his eyes, but presumably this did not occur to him; at any rate he did not do it. A sudden curiosity as to what was going to happen took possession of him—a fierce and almost brutal desire to spy upon that other man's happiness.

What happened was just about what he had instinctively expected, only that Mr. Saunders took very long about it, so long that David had some

difficulty with his breath, and that before the steady young man had succeeded in detaching his lips from those of the only half-unwilling girl, he began to fear that the thumping of his heart would have betrayed him.

After that they had passed, luckily for David, but his night was done for. Incessantly he dreamt of just such another long kiss, pressed to other and far more beautiful lips, that he was looking for all night and which ever evaded him.

In the morning he found a grey hair in his comb, and stood looking at it stupidly for some minutes, as though at some startling discovery. At sight of that white thread he suddenly felt old, much older than his twenty-nine years. After all, he had not quite so much time for waiting as he had supposed. He seemed all at once to realise that he was wasting his youth in love-sick sighing, and for the first time faced the possibility of Jessie Alington never yielding, and of his having sighed in vain. In one moment his great patience, which he had believed invulnerable, finally gave way. It would be unworthy of him—so it appeared to him now—to go on waiting on this woman's pleasure, just as it had been weak to argue with her in the past.

From out of the gable window of the little white-washed attic-room, which commanded so open a view of the bare rolling uplands, he could see the fleecy clouds scudding over the pure blue sky, in as great a haste as though they were bound for a lover's tryst. The sense of hurry seemed to catch him too, as he stood there in his shirt-sleeves, *with his razor in his hand.* Everything in him

pressed for a decision. He would ask her once more, but for the last time, and, whatever the result, he would abide by her decision. He would tell her to choose once for all between her fantastical scruples and him, and despite his half angry determination, he could not believe that his long-standing and much-tried love would not triumph in the decisive moment.

Still in his shirt-sleeves, he already had the timetable in his hands. One of his rapid resolutions had been formed; for although David was sometimes slow to make up his mind, he was always quick to act when once he knew what he meant to do. For a week past he had felt that he was not really wanted here; perhaps he might be wanted elsewhere. He would leave Meg and Jean to crow over their own lovers, and to criticise each other's; he would leave them to their happiness and to the undisturbed possession of the garden, and he would go and see whether, for him as well as for them, a portion of happiness had not been set aside.

CHAPTER VIII.

SPRING at Allwood—a more flowery, more advanced spring than in the northern uplands, and one in which Jessie was revelling in spite of herself, for the very first April days had found her in the country, driven out of London either by a strange consciousness of solitude, or else by the hyacinths in her window-box, which would not cease to talk to her of their country cousins in the fields.

It was not exactly the sort of spring she had erstwhile been accustomed to; she missed the touch of wildness and the sense of triumphant struggle which characterised this season at her old home, but it was very fair of its kind and a marvellously inventive imp, successfully playing pranks with the oppressive solemnity of the Allwood park, bringing unsuspected variety into its monotony, life into its stagnation, as though a juvenile mask had been laughingly clapped on to a grave elderly countenance. The knotted oak branches bore as tender buds as did the twigs of the youngest hazel and willow, and the dull expanse of water, that was so depressingly like a blind mirror, began to dimple and break into ripples under the light-hearted leap of the little fishes just aroused from their winter torpor, and snapping at the new-born midges. The daisies came so thickly out of the

grass as to despair the heart of the head gardener, and there were distant glades that were as blue with hyacinths and yellow with primroses as though they did not belong to an orderly English park.

Since making this last discovery Jessie spent little time indoors. The splendid, chilly rooms had never been to her taste, and now that they bore on them the stamp of chronic desertion, they had become more hateful than ever. The echo of her steps in the long corridors sent a shiver down her back, and the far-off corners of the vast reception rooms seemed full of ghostly reminiscences. Out of doors, though as much alone, she never felt lonely, since the company of birds and insects almost sufficed—almost, but not quite, for the sight of all those nests building, and butterflies fluttering—always in pairs—was apt to set her thinking of all sorts of things that had never occurred to her during the London fogs. Seeing all these young things she was abruptly reminded that, despite her crape and her cap, she too was young, and in these moments something moved within her, as though to demand its rights.

Perhaps it was only the want of occupation that ailed her; and, besides visits to the village—where, however, her own liberality had almost abolished pauperism and therefore left little work to be done—she now began to fill up her time by almost daily pilgrimages to the family vault, where Sir Augustus slept under the escutcheon of his race, the last of a long line of helmeted knights and booted squires, whose qualities he could scarcely be said to have inherited. Each time that Jessie went there it was

with a bunch of spring flowers or a wreath in her hands. Since hitting upon this idea her visits had become more frequent. To pass through this wealth of blossoms and not to stoop towards them was more than Jessie could manage, while to spend her days in plucking flowers merely to put them into the Sèvres vases in the big drawing-room, appeared to her self-prescribed seriousness too frivolous an occupation. Now the problem was solved. There could surely be no more suitable occupation for a mourning widow than to put fresh flowers daily on the grave of the deceased, and with it was found the pretext for revelling to her heart's content in those treasures after which her fingers had been itching. Henceforward she spent hours in the park, and often came home staggering under the weight of her basket.

There came an afternoon which she spent almost entirely in the company of primroses. She followed a sort of plan in the ordering of these grave wreaths, and, with an innate love for broad effects, generally avoided mixing her flowers. Sir Augustus had had a wreath of anemones and one of hyacinths, and to-day it was the primrose day. She had discovered a new batch of them in an unsuspected place, at no great distance from the house, and had thrown herself hungrily upon them. The basket was full in a few minutes, but the spot was too enticing to be left so quickly. The day was wonderfully mild and the grass conveniently dry; she would make her wreath here on the spot, instead of at home; and, secure in her sense of solitude, Lady Alington was presently sitting on the ground, her lap full of the yellow flowers, her hat

beside her and the slanting sunbeams drawing red and yellow gleams from her uncovered hair, while her busy fingers twisted the long grass-stalks round the flower-stems, after a fashion learnt in the old days. And really it felt very like the old days, the afternoons spent among the sea-weeds and the sea-pinks—and despite the black dress she looked wonderfully in place, for underneath the stricken woman the high-spirited child had never lain quite still, had moved rebelliously at times, protesting against this iron rule.

It was thus that David found her half-an-hour later, having been told at the house that Lady Alington was in the park. He was close upon her before she even guessed at an intruder, for the primroses were not lying according to her taste, and, absorbed in settling them, she did not even hear the rustling of the twigs. It was not until a shadow fell upon the flowers that she lifted her head. Seeing him standing at only two paces from her, she was conscious just at first only of an astonishment so great that she remained for several moments gazing up at him, immovable, her lips almost foolishly apart, her eyes staring stupidly, and the wreath, as well as the hand that held it, poised as stiffly in the air as though both had been cut of wood. Upon a momentary pallor there came a burning flush; a sudden apprehension had followed the astonishment. She had seen by his face that something new was going to happen, something that had not been yet, and, without a word, she struggled to her feet, as well as the burden of flowers and the length of her black skirts would allow her. The primroses fell in a yellow

rain around her, while the unfinished wreath remained in her right hand. The left she put uneasily to her bare head, as though feeling for the muslin cap which so seldom left it.

"How do you come to be here?" she asked, haughtily, for she was not only alarmed, she was also offended by his uninvited appearance. To receive him in London was quite a different thing from giving him the entry of her country retreat; indeed she had always been careful to abstain from furnishing him with any pretext for visiting her here. Her pride was at this moment as much in arms as her fears were aroused.

"I come to be here because you are here, and because I have something to say to you. In London they told me you were in the country, and at the door I was directed to the park; surely that is simple enough."

He spoke with an assurance, at least equal to hers, and with a certain badly suppressed anger which she did not yet understand.

"You might have written," she said, coldly. It was difficult to forgive him for having discovered her in a position that would have better become a schoolgirl. "I don't understand with what right——"

"You shall understand immediately—or do you mean to say that after all these years I should not be in my right even if I followed you to the corners of the earth for my answer?"

"What answer?"

"The answer as to whether you will be my wife or not."

"That cannot be," said Jessie, without even re-

flecting, and merely because she had said it each time he asked her. She was still a little too bewildered by the suddenness of the attack to be able to think coherently, but instinctively she held to the form of her refusal.

"It cannot be; you know it cannot."

"If I knew it I should not be here. Think again before you say your last word—you have not thought enough. I swear to you most solemnly that this is the last time I shall put to you the question. Send me away to-day, and I shall never again molest you. If you love me, think again. Think of everything. I have loved you for long, Jessie—for your sake I have been an exile, have suffered cold and heat, living only in the hope of winning you—for you I have come near to breaking my old father's heart, and have wounded another heart which loved me; all these things I have done for you, and now I want my reward! You are beautiful, but is it certain that you would have found another man to love you for so long and so truly? Is mine a love to be thrown lightly away? Oh, think, Jessie! Think, before it is too late!" and a little softness came into the voice that earnestness had made harsh.

"I have thought," answered Jessie, trembling a little under the contagion of his excitement. "You have spoken like this before; I have heard you and you have heard me, but you know what stands between us."

He stopped her with a vehement gesture.

"Nothing stands between us but the fantastical creations of your brain. I will not hear another word of them. I have listened too much already,

have had too much patience with your self-invented scruples. I believed in them once, I even respected them—but I don't believe in them any longer. If you still can refuse me in face of my years of devotion, then it is only because you never loved me, or have ceased to love me. Scruples are a convenient shield for a change of sentiment, but don't ask me to believe any more of that melodramatic nonsense," he finished with a movement of almost brutal anger.

Jessie stood speechless before this vehemence. It was hard indeed to recognise in this man, with the flushed forehead and rasping voice the quiet and courteous David who, even while disagreeing with her, had always treated her with such almost reverential deference. Where was that tolerance he had showed her when he made his first appeal three years ago in the old tannery room? There was not a trace of it remaining now.

"If you love me at all," he went on, with his merciless speech, that sounded more like an accusation of crime than a declaration of love, "you love me too little to brave the remarks of the world. You disclaim the idea, I know it, but I do not believe you. If you could love as I love, the world would not exist for you. Let it go its way and say its say—let everything that holds you to your dead husband go its way. I do not think that even in your inmost mind you can accuse me of wanting you for anything but yourself. Throw it all from you, and come to me with the dress on your back, and I shall receive you as I would a queen—and what can the world say then—if it is that you fear?"

Jessie only said again as before: "It cannot

be." She had said it so often now that she could almost have repeated it in her sleep, but her voice quivered painfully as she faced him with wide, startled eyes, and the yellow wreath clutched in her trembling fingers.

"It can be if you want. If it was never to be you should never have received me in London; you should not have allowed me to dwell on your face. You knew that I should never be satisfied with your friendship, but I suppose it flattered your vanity to see so willing a slave. You are guilty towards me, Jessie, and for the second time in your life—guiltier than the first time. Make good your debt, Jessie, make good your debt. How is it that you are not afraid of spoiling *my* life? Is it only the dead that awake your scruples, and not the living? Whatever becomes of me now it is to your account that it will be put down—and it is the last time I ask you—don't forget! By my honour as a man I bind myself never to ask you again. Jessie, for the last time——"

"No, no!" she cried, with a sudden, sharp cry, putting out her hands before her, as though to hold him off, although he had not moved.

Then there fell silence for a moment. David had all at once grown quiet; was he convinced at last? Long he looked at her with a sort of incredulous scrutiny, and then slowly passed his hand over his eyes.

"So this is the end," he said at last, in a low, measured tone which yet somehow betrayed a great inward despair. "I am going. I shall be your slave no longer. You have chosen. God will help me to live without you—you who have made havoc

of my life. He must know that you are not worthy of such love as mine!"

He finished with blazing eyes, and, without giving her time to speak again, turned back the way he had come, following the trace of his own heavy footsteps in the newly sprouting grass.

The stormy scene had been so short that Jessie scarcely even now quite realised what had happened. Within five minutes he had come and gone again, and she was left standing alone, with the primroses in her hands and at her feet, shaken, bewildered, almost a little giddy. Mechanically she glanced down at the wreath she held, and became vaguely aware that it would no longer do for Sir Augustus's tomb. Without knowing what she did she had clutched it so convulsively that half the flowers were crushed and faded. Some blind instinct had made her hold on to the primrose wreath as fast as though it had been some principle which she feared was escaping her.

CHAPTER IX.

" I DECLARE it's David ! "

" Yes, it's me, Aunt Mercy. "

It was while making his exit from the Hay-market Theatre, about eight days after his visit to Allwood, that David found himself thus accosted. This was not the first theatre he had been inside since his parting from Jessie. He had left her presence with the fixed intention of making a new start, having, in the heat of his indignation, resolved that he was not going to let this woman spoil his life for him. He would no longer live like a hermit, with only one object before his eyes—he would go back again to the point at which she had first come into his life, and begin to live like other men. It was to carry out this idea, that was more an instinctive movement of reaction than a clearly laid out plan, that David had suddenly become a frequenter of theatres, and even a ball-goer. Scarcely an evening of this past week had been spent at home; and no matter how heavily the hours had trailed, he would go again next day, doggedly determined to enjoy himself. He was too much out of practice to succeed immediately, but no doubt the taste would come in time, and with this thought he encouraged himself.

It was on one of those occasions that he heard

his name pronounced in the crowd near the entrance, and found himself close to his aunt—not without a momentary apprehension, for he always felt a little guilty in her presence, more especially after a long interval, and of late times he certainly had neglected his relations. Instinctively he now looked for a frown on the round, smooth face, but was most agreeably surprised to meet a smile instead. Contrary to his expectations and deserts, Mrs. M'Farrel was all graciousness and radiancy, more radiant than he remembered having seen her for long.

"And Monica?" asked David, as he stood beside his aunt, while she waited for her carriage.

Her smile broadened. "Monica is a little colded, but she has friends with her to help her spend the evening. Mr. and Mrs. Deyes, most charming people, both of them; we see a great deal of them just now."

"Indeed," said David, politely, not quite grasping the situation.

Mrs. M'Farrel promptly came to his aid. It was against her habit to leave anything to people's intuition.

"They're mother and son, you know," she remarked significantly. "Not husband and wife—and the son is quite one of the most amiable men I have ever met, and very well off too."

There came back to David's mind the announcement which his father had made the other day, and he began to explain to himself his Aunt's unusual radiancy.

"I don't mind telling you in confidence," she went on, loud enough to be heard at the other side

of the crowd, "that I have great hopes in that direction. *His* intentions are quite clear, and Monica seems inclined to listen to reason at last. A splendid position, and twice as much money as Monica herself will have; they simply can't help being happy."

And she gave a would-be affectionate squeeze to her nephew's arm, looking up into his face the while to see how he was bearing it.

"You really must come and see us soon, David. I should so much like to introduce you to Mr. Deyes. As Monica's cousin you ought surely to know her future husband. Come now, say at once that you will lunch with us to-morrow."

"I shall be very pleased," said David, without hesitation. Was it not his new principle to accept every invitation that came his way? And besides he always enjoyed a talk with Monica, and was only kept off from more frequent intercourse by her mother's too obvious intentions. Now apparently that danger was over; being no longer wanted as a husband he might become a mere cousin, and enjoy a cousin's privileges. And really he required them just now. Monica was the very person whose soothing presence might be expected to act beneficially on a sore and angry heart; her gentle voice and calm eyes would be like a cool hand laid on a burning wound. Why had he not thought of her before? He was sure of her sympathy even in an unspoken grief. Indeed he had always been dimly aware that he had a certain importance in her eyes, though far from guessing even distantly at the real place he held. Yes, he would certainly go, if only to see the man she was going to marry.

Curiously enough he did not feel over well disposed towards that man. He was too sore at heart just now to be able to rejoice at another man's happiness—was, in fact, conscious of almost grudging it to him, as to all happy men. His frame of mind at this juncture was embittered, uncharitable; the sort of disposition in which men are apt to commit follies.

Meanwhile Mrs. M'Farrel had driven home, supremely satisfied with herself, and looking forward with a delight that was only half malicious to the pleasure of producing her new acquisition, and by its brilliancy confounding the ungrateful nephew who had refused to be made happy. She would show him plainly that she did not need him any more. If she had taken more time for reflection she would perhaps have wondered whether it was quite prudent to put Monica's unsettled resolution to the test of a meeting with David, but reflection was another thing which did not belong to Mrs. M'Farrel's habits.

When David entered the drawing-room in Park Street next day he found the mother and daughter still alone, Mrs. M'Farrel as radiant in her morning dress as she had been yesterday under the theatre wraps, but Monica very silent, though, to judge from the unusual flush on the generally so faintly tinted cheek, not as calm as usual. Something had moved or was moving her deeply, as David could not fail to perceive in the moment that she laid her hand in his; there could be no mistaking the luminous look in the blue eyes, nor the somewhat nervous pressure that, almost unconsciously, she gave his hand. Her want of words did not weaken the

impression, but seemed rather to say that if she did not speak it was only because she was not quite sure of her voice. Could it be the near expectation of seeing Mr. Deyes that was thus moving her? Surely it was not reasonable to suppose that the meeting with himself could be the cause? The idea seemed too preposterous—and yet how her fingers had trembled as they closed around his!

He was still perplexedly turning over the question in his mind when Mr. Deyes himself entered, smiling, bowing, and making profuse apologies for his mother who had been unexpectedly kept away. David glanced sharply at the newcomer. But though distinctly inclined to be critical there was not much he could find fault with about the man's outward appearance. Aunt Mercy's new favourite was distinctly good-looking in a portly, comfortable, not over-juvenile sort of way, which even in its double chin and full white throat had good nature broadly written, convincing at first sight of innumerable qualities—more of the heart than of the brain, and thus successfully disarming criticism. As to the state of his feelings, which he was at small pains to conceal, there seemed little doubt. The closely watching David even noticed in his eyes something of that luminous appearance which he had just been puzzled about in his cousin's, and at this discovery quickly looked back to see if it were still there. No—strange to say, it was gone, as suddenly as a light extinguished. Her eyes, although still slightly troubled, had suddenly lost their brightness, and the eloquent silence too was now broken, as politely, though rather reservedly, shaking hands with Mr. Deyes she launched into

some perfectly conventional regrets concerning the absence of his mother.

It was at table only that he could take a closer view of Monica's wooer, and he now decided at once that, although a good enough fellow of his kind, he was not good enough for her. There was *naïveté* about his appearance, and a pointlessness in his chronic smile that could not make up for the want of importance about his mental personality. And this was the man whom Aunt Mercy imagined Monica about to marry! How little she knew her daughter! To be sure, he was the sixth or seventh aspirant about whom she had imagined the same thing, and each time she had felt quite sure of her game. He almost wondered now that he should have put any faith in the announcement. Watch as he might, he could discover in Monica's manner towards her wooer nothing but the usual gentle courtesy she extended to all comers, and perhaps a touch of nervousness which seemed to speak of some inward conflict. This last observation it was which made him wonder whether Monica, in her self-abnegation, might not after all let herself be persuaded into throwing herself away on this merely good man, just in order to satisfy her mother. That certainly would be a thousand pities. Some one ought to warn her of her danger. And supposing he did so himself, it next occurred to him. It seemed a thing that, failing a brother, a cousin might take upon himself to do. He would see if by any chance an opportunity occurred.

The opportunity did occur about an hour after luncheon. Mr. Deyes was gone, outstayed by *David*, who had sat on steadily in an almost inimical

attitude, which greatly puzzled the other's boundless good-nature. Mrs. M'Farrel was writing a letter in the library, having clean forgotten that there was another visitor on the premises. Her nephew had so entirely ceased to be of any importance in her eyes that his going or coming need no longer be counted with. Looking about him, David realised that he was alone with his cousin, and that if he meant to give her that cousinly warning this would be the right moment.

"Monica," he said, without preamble, since any moment they might be interrupted, "you are not going to let yourself be persuaded into anything, are you?"

Monica looked up in blank astonishment from the illustrated paper she had been fingering.

"What can you mean, David?"

"About Mr. Deyes," he said, somewhat awkwardly. "It's as plain as several pike-staffs that Aunt Mercy is just consuming herself with the desire that you should take him—indeed, she told me so herself—and it's also plain that you don't care a fig about the man. You're not going to marry the man merely to make her happy, are you? It's the sort of thing I can't help suspecting you of, somehow."

Monica was again turning over the pages of the paper, but at the rate at which she was doing it, it was doubtful whether she saw any of the illustrations. She did not speak until after a moment, and even then the effort at calmness was too evident to deceive.

"I don't know what makes you ask me, David. Surely whatever resolution I may come to it can

make no difference to you. I believe Mr. Deyes is a very good man, and I believe he cares for me; and surely the love of a good and true man is not a thing to be lightly thrown aside."

"Then you *have* thought of it?" cried David, almost indignantly, his tones sharpened by a sudden stab at the heart. Her words were so very like some which he himself had spoken only a few days ago.

The pages were turning faster than before.

"Why should mamma's life also be a disappointment—I mean, why shouldn't Mr. Deyes succeed in——"

"Is *your* life a disappointment, Monica?"

Against her positive will she gave him one startled glance, and tried to answer, but could not. But no words were needed, for this time her eyes had let out the secret that had been so carefully guarded for so many years. He would need to have been blind indeed not to read that look aright. In one moment he understood that she still loved him, as he had known that she once loved him in her early girlhood, and stood dumbfounded before the revelation. For if this was true, then she had loved him as long and as hopelessly as he had loved Jessie Alington. Truly he had been too proud of his powers of devotion, since this girl had equalled it, and almost surpassed; for she had loved without even a moment of real hope, while he had known, or at least believed that his feelings were returned. He began to remember a thousand things now—the light on her face whenever they met; that strange look she wore when he had found her at the bottom of the tannery staircase,

innocently eavesdropping on his parting from Jessie; even the kilted doll that was called David "for her"—everything, everything he remembered, and to the right and to the left the most trifling circumstances seemed to range themselves as witnesses, and each and all accused him of cruelty towards this woman. There was something bewildering, and yet at the same time fiercely exhilarating, about the discovery. To the pride which had been so unkindly wounded by another woman it could not but be a profound satisfaction to find here one to whom he must mean everything, and the pain of the angrily sore heart lost some of its importance at sight of another heart which had surely suffered even more.

"Monica," he said, abruptly and yet softly, "is it true, then, that you have never quite forgotten me?"

Again she could not speak, but again her silence was more answer than he required.

David got up from his chair, in a movement of irresistible excitement.

"Will you be my wife, Monica?" he said, breathlessly. "Tell me quickly, will you be my wife?"

Then only she broke down. She had been strong under unhappiness, and braver than most women succeed in being, but the approach of happiness made her weak. After one more brief moment of struggle she was sobbing as helplessly as a child.

David was beside her in a moment, bending over her, almost kneeling at her side, trying to pull away one of the hands that obstinately covered her

eyes, speaking to her, imploring her, his heart pierced the while by an acute feeling of pity, his senses excited and even irritated, in the way that some men are by the sight of women's tears.

"Don't cry, Monica; don't cry!" he besought her. "You must never cry again; the pain is all over now, for you and for me. I want you to be my wife, Monica—I want to make good again the harm that I have done; say only that you will be my wife!"

At the sound of the words repeated Monica seemed to pull herself together, forcibly recovering a little of her calmness, as she drew back abruptly from his embrace.

"No, no," she said, with sudden energy, "you do not mean that. I know very well that I have never been more to you than a cousin, David, and I do not want to be married out of pity."

"I mean that you shall be more," said David, almost grimly, inwardly determined that he should make himself love her. "I mean that you shall be everything."

"And the other one?" asked Monica, with a keener look in her blue eyes. "You can't deceive me, David. I know that you loved Jessie Alington."

"I do not love her any longer," said David, and so great was the emotion of the moment that he believed himself. "There is nothing more between Jessie Alington and me."

So proudly and coldly were the words spoken that they came near to convincing her.

"Is this really so?" asked Monica, wistfully.

"It is so. I do not want ever to hear her name

again. It would be foolish of me to deny that I burnt my fingers in Forest Place, but I have learnt a lesson in the process, and I mean to profit by it. I have learnt the worth of your love, amongst other things."

"And you think it possible that you should care for me in time?" she asked, still wavering between the desire to yield and the fear of doing so rashly.

"I care for you now," said David, warmly. "No man could be loved by you without loving you in return. Try me only, Monica! Save my life from being lost and lonely; will you try me, Monica?"

He had hold of her hands again and was pressing them feverishly between his own, while his eyes and eager face implored her.

"I will try you," cried Monica, impulsively, flinging from her the doubts that still would have troubled her. Somewhere at the far back of her mind she was still aware of a lurking distrust, but she had waited too long for this happiness, and had despaired of it too profoundly to be able to resist it when it was come at last. Even the prudent have their moments of imprudence. Shutting her eyes, as it were, to the danger which she dimly guessed at, she stretched out her hands towards hope, letting her moral self go in a sense of absolute acquiescence that was as troubled and yet as delicious as the one with which she abandoned herself to the long-desired kiss, which now burnt upon her lips—the first she had had from her cousin since those lips were eight years old.

By the time David was back in the street he completely realised what had happened. His de-

claration had surprised him quite as much as it had done Monica, but even now, when reviewing it in comparative calmness, he saw no reason for regretting what he had done. No man certainly could go far wrong in marrying Monica; and besides, what was he losing, since Jessie would never have belonged to him? And was it not a joyful thought that, while paying off his debt to Monica, he would likewise be fulfilling his father's life-long wish, as well as saving his cousin from throwing herself away? And decidedly also it was comforting to think that he need no longer walk out alone in this sweet April weather. In fact there were so many reasons for finding the arrangement desirable, that no place remained for doubt to intervene. The consciousness of having created such perfect happiness as he had seen on Monica's face that afternoon ought to be enough for the happiness of any man. And as he began to think again of the blissfulness of her eyes, he almost believed that he loved her.

CHAPTER X.

THE primrose wreath which had suffered so much at Jessie's hands during David's brief visit had been the last she made that spring. Her invulnerable attitude notwithstanding, the interview had left its traces on her, seriously disturbing the artificial tranquillity into which she had succeeded in working herself. Already on the following day she discovered that there was nothing to do at Allwood, and abruptly returned to her work in London, perhaps no longer with the whole of her early enthusiasm, but with the blind craving for occupation, grown all the more pressing since she had lost the pleasant distraction of David's visits. Whether she quite believed in his threats of not seeing her again, she did not herself know, and during the first days spent in town she instinctively listened for his step on the landing, quite prepared to see him re-enter the room and re-open the old vexed point. But as yet he had not come, and it really seemed as though, at least for the present, he meant to sulk.

Under these circumstances the expeditions to the slums were not sufficient to fill up Jessie's time, besides requiring more self-abnegation than usual in this sunshiny weather. Various other devices for occupation were therefore had recourse to; reading was one of these devices, another was shopping.

It was while engaged one day in selecting some black lace in one of the large West End warehouses—she had not bought any but black lace for at least four years—that she found herself close to a radiant and voluble person, also choosing lace, but white lace, and not black, and quickly recognised Mrs. M'Farrel. The greetings were amiable, but indifferent, and also a little inattentive, for Mrs. M'Farrel was much exercised in her mind as to which pattern it was advisable to decide upon.

"What do *you* vote for, Lady Alington?" she confidentially asked. "The palms are very pretty and quite out of the common, but then, perhaps, the flower pattern is more really graceful—and these arabesques also have a great charm of their own. I'll have to wait till Monica comes, I suppose. Monica, Monica, where are you? I declare she's choosing gloves over there, instead of attending to me here! One would think it was my wedding dress that was being decided on, and not hers!"

"I didn't know Miss M'Farrel was going to be married," said Jessie, politely. There had never been any intimacy between her and Monica, although they had grown up at the same place.

"Didn't you? I thought everybody knew it. I almost fancy this pattern has the best fall," sighed Mrs. M'Farrel, still torn between the palms and the flowers.

"I live so much alone now that I never hear anything. And when is the marriage to be?"

"—but the other's tint seems somehow more perfect. When? Oh, in the autumn, of course."

"And at St. Mallans, I suppose?"

"Yes. I do wish Monica would come and decide for herself. Now that I have given you all our news you really might give me some advice in exchange. I told you whom she is marrying, didn't I?"

"No, that is the one thing you have not told me."

"You're not likely to know him. Oh yes, by the bye, you met David at our house?"

"David! Captain Ellis! Yes, I know him, but of course it is not him she is going to marry."

"Why not? Is there any reason why Monica shouldn't marry her cousin?" asked Mrs. M'Farrel, indignant at this cold reception of her news. "Perhaps you don't know that he is her cousin, and that she has cared for him since they were both babies."

It was as well for Jessie's secret that Monica was at that moment still busy at the glove counter yonder, for any one but Mrs. M'Farrel—and even Mrs. M'Farrel at any other moment—could not have failed to be struck by the sudden fixedness of Lady Alington's eyes, and by the livid pallor which slowly spread even to her lips, gradually extinguishing the brilliant tints of the complexion. Of such palpable emotion an explanation was necessary, but if any one looked for it at that moment it was only the shopman, who stood patiently waiting for the decision about the lace, and of course he was far too perfect a machine to betray even by a twitch of an eyelid that he was aware of anything beyond the limits of the counter. Another attendant passing at that moment pushed a chair a little forward, with the vague idea that here was a lady who was find-

ing the shop too hot; but in the merciful bustle around, these two strangers were the only people who even saw Jessie's face, and luckily they did not count.

"Are you quite sure of this?" she asked at last, with a curiously heavy tongue.

Even Mrs. M'Farrel's attention was aroused for one passing moment.

"Sure? Am I sure about the man my daughter is going to marry?" she began, with twitching eyebrows, but Jessie interrupted her.

"How stupid I am! I didn't mean that exactly, I meant to ask whether I had understood aright. Captain Ellis is going to marry Miss M'Farrel—that is it, is it not?"

"What else could it possibly be?" said the elder woman, a little vaguely, her mind again taken up with the lace to which the shopman was discreetly recalling her attention. "You say the palms are more fashionable? Well, it's Monica who must have the last word. Stop here a moment, Lady Alington, while I fetch her to give her verdict, and you can give her your congratulations at the same time."

And, through the thick of the fashionable crowd, she made a dash towards the glove counter.

But when she came back with Monica in tow, Lady Alington was gone.

At home Jessie sat down with her hat still on, and looked about her with eyes that were as yet empty of everything but a great and blank astonishment.

David going to be married; and married to another woman but her! If she had been told that

he had been shut up in a madhouse or had forged a cheque, it would scarcely have seemed more difficult to believe than this. In spite of having told him and sincerely having believed that it would be a crime for them to be happy together, in spite of having rejected him without any thought of ultimately yielding ever stirring in the background of her mind, she had yet never been prepared for such a contingency as this. Unconsciously and instinctively she had expected him to persevere in the attitude, with which he had already become identified in her mind—to go on waiting for her, hopelessly, indefinitely, for all eternity, maybe. It seemed to her that being thus waited for, and fervently, though fruitlessly, implored, would have made life quite bearable. So long as he pleaded his cause, even although she was determined not to grant it, she could feel that he still belonged to her alone, and not to any other woman; but this way——

To think that he should have found the strength to tear himself free! It seemed to her wellnigh incredible. His threats she had indeed heard, but she had not really believed them, as she now discovered. She had never felt more certain of anything than of this man being her absolute and undisputed property; somebody for whom only she existed—and now he was going to become the property of another woman. Her pride suffered at the thought as much almost as her love. Exactly his devotion it had been which had given her a somewhat exaggerated idea of her own worth, and made such a defection appear to her almost impossible.

So he was going to try to live without her, was

he? Would he succeed? What could that concern her—what could the whole matter concern her, since she could never have married him herself? After all she had been right—surely she *must* have been right to reject him so persistently. How could she have known any peace of mind as his wife, thinking of that which lay between them? To be sure he had always said—what was it that he had said? But it could be no matter now.

She got up uneasily from her seat, and moved slowly about the room. She had only just noticed that for the first time, even in thought, she had admitted the fulfilment of his desires as a possibility, and she was telling herself that it was dangerous as well as useless—yes, particularly useless, after what she had heard that morning. If she must think of that subject—and it seemed that she could think of nothing else—it would be wiser surely to review her own reasons for the attitude adopted.

And now a strange thing came to pass, something that looked almost like a miracle, and was yet no greater miracle than the unfolding of the leaf that has reached its development, or the reddening of the fruit when its hour has come, together with the sunbeam or the shower it required. Looking for her reasons, those weighty reasons which had kept her stubborn for four years, she could not find them; re-examining the scruples which had once seemed so conclusive, she discovered that they had dwindled away to the mere shadow of themselves, and that that which she had been clutching so convulsively was only the empty shell of an idea which had long since been drying up under the glow of David's eloquence. Her own attitude, which had

once appeared to her so righteous, now struck her as almost hysterical. At the time she had not been aware of the process that was going on. The position outwardly so firmly held, had long been undermined, and waited only for the decisive shock to crumble to the ground. That shock had come to-day; without it it is quite possible she might have gone on for years—perhaps for ever—believing herself invulnerable, and therefore being so. For the first time to-day she drew out those oft-repeated arguments, which she had heard, without examining, and weighed them against her own, with a result that was simply disconcerting. It was like the sudden shivering of a treacherous pane of glass that had been distorting the view before her eyes; like a sudden sobering of the senses after a long delirium. The mere thought of losing David had frightened her back into common-sense.

The transformation was so quick, and apparently so abrupt, that already in the first half hour after hearing the decisive news she had lost sight of her own point of view. Imprudence was all she could now discover in her conduct of that unlucky summer, and more than enough penance had been done for that already. Where was the barrier which her half-sick imagination had erected between her and her lover? Steadily gazed at, and firmly grasped, that impediment which had appeared to be so insurmountable melted away like a bodiless phantom.

If this revelation had come that day at Allwood.

. . . "Oh, my God, why did it not come?"

With a half cry she stood still, grasping her temples. It was now only that, the fumes of surprise and incredulity being a little dispersed, she

began really to suffer. The realisation of what she was losing, and of how easily she might have kept it, rushed in upon her, together with the question as to what was now to become of her life. She had known that she loved this man, but she had not known that she loved him to the degree that this raging pain in her heart now told her—a pain composed of furious self-reproach and bitter jealousy. So long as she had felt sure of him it had seemed possible to renounce him; now that he had escaped her—and, although she was not aware of it, the mere fact of his having had the force to escape her raised him by another degree in her estimation and consequently by another degree inflamed her passion—she felt that even a crime would not be too high a price for getting him back.

But she would not get him back—of course not; that was not David's way of doing things. The man who had been so true to her for so many years would never be untrue to any other woman. He would marry his pale-faced, pale-haired cousin, and as she thought of it, Jessie looked up and met her own eyes in the glass, for it was before the big toilet-mirror that, unknown to herself, she had stood still. Mechanically she put up her hand again and pulled off the black hat, then, with the same unthinking gesture, stretched out towards the table on which lay her widow's cap. It was almost in its place when a new change came over her face—a look of sudden repulsion. Without following up her own train of thought she pulled the cap quickly from her head and flung it back so vehemently on to the table, that it slipped from there to the floor and there remained unnoticed. The sight

of that white muslin construction had suddenly become distasteful, in fact almost ludicrous.

There was but one thing left to hope for now; that she would be spared a meeting with the man whom she persisted in regarding as a traitor. To leave town would have been the simplest course; but the solitude of Allwood was full of horrors for her now—fuller far than it had always been—and even St. Mallans was too thickly haunted with irritating memories to be an agreeable sojourn. She preferred just now to be among strangers, for upon her too had come some of the reaction that had sent David back to social life. She wanted to see life and movement around her, and even noise; it was pleasanter to listen to than the inward voice. She would trust to London's immensity to keep them apart. And for several weeks, and despite of many half-starts which the sight of a pair of unusually broad shoulders, or of a certain mould of brown head would give to Jessie's overstrained nerves, London justified the trust put in it. But at last there came a certain chilly and overcast June day that seemed like a stray particle of November when, having started and then re-assured herself, she looked again more closely, and recognized that this time it was no false alarm, but actually he, and that she was alone with him in a badly lighted compartment of the underground railway. Fortunately it wanted only a couple of minutes to the station—not *her* station, but that need not matter, so long as she could be free of his presence. Had he recognised her? In this light it was almost more probable that he had not. She would have

to pass him to get to the door; she did so with sharply averted face and almost blind with agitation, and somewhat prematurely too, for the train had scarcely slackened. Having groped her way to the door she saw she was too soon, and, with an access of curiosity too sharp to be resisted, looked towards him.

"It is true, is it not, that you are going to be married?" she asked, breathlessly. "I ought to congratulate you, I suppose."

He made no answer, but by the almost inimical coldness of his face she saw that he had recognised her from the first.

The train was all but standing still; but she felt she could not go without at least the attempt to wound him.

"And you pretended to love me!" came in a scornful whisper from between her scarcely parted lips, just as the porter pulled open the door. "How right I was not to yield!"

And this she only said because she knew that she had been wrong. She was not herself aware of all the bitterness in her voice, nor of the reproach that lay in the glance she gave him in descending, but which seemed to fall on a face of stone.

Without either moving or speaking he sat on in the same position for long after she was gone—the same cold reserve on his features, his eyes stiffly fixed on the doorway which had so recently been filled by her figure.

CHAPTER XI.

CRAIGIE TOWERS, generally deserted at this season, had in the last days of June become a scene of joyful bustle; for the wedding, originally fixed for autumn, was to take place in the first week of July. The change of programme had been brought about solely by David's wish, for both Monica and her mother would have preferred a little more breathing space, the former because the happiness that awaited her appeared to require a more lengthy preparation, the latter because the bustle in itself was happiness enough, and would well have borne being spread over the summer. But David had been so urgent that he had triumphed, even though his urgency was so abrupt as not to appear quite reasonable; for, until the latter half of June, when he had come to her towards evening on a rather dismal November-like day, Monica had found him perfectly acquiescent in her own plans. During these last weeks, seeing him so content in her society, and dwelling with such evident pleasure on the smallest details of her future life, she had gradually felt her confidence returning. But to-day her doubts stirred again. It is true that the chief change in her lover seemed to consist of a newborn impatience to make her his wife, and an intolerant disregard of her own and her mother's arguments

to the contrary; but Monica had shrewdly feminine wits, and this impatience seemed to her to require some explanation beyond that given, which indeed comprised nothing but a dislike to passing the summer alone, a burning desire to be settled, and—well, simply the declaration that he wanted it so. And yet she ended by yielding. She would not open her eyes yet, for fear of what she might see. It was cowardice, of course, but she had been brave for so long that she might well indulge in a little of the contrary. She had known that David had not been in love with her at the moment when he proposed to her, but during these last peacefully happy weeks she had gained the hope of winning his love in time. Why should she not succeed, since Jessie Alington had succeeded in making him forget his first love?—that mysterious, only dimly guessed-at stranger who had come between them eight years ago, when they had been but boy and girl, and the wishes of the family had betrothed them already. If he could love a second time, then why not a third? His being able to do so indeed took a little of the gloss from her ideal; this David was not quite the David she had made of him in her mind, but, such as he was, she was content to have him, and would be more than content with any crumbs of love which he might have spared for her.

Before they parted that evening an early day of July had been fixed for the wedding. David's papers were in order already; looked at closely there really was no valid reason for waiting until autumn, none except those given by Mrs. M'Farrel, and which concerned dressmakers and milli-

ners, but which David's determination easily crushed.

Once in the thick of the preparations, Monica had no more time to examine David's motives; and the preparations were very ample, and as festive as the short notice would allow of. The burden of them lay chiefly on Mrs. M'Farrel's plump and willing shoulders, but it was impossible for Monica to avoid her share. Almost for the first time in their lives mother and daughter were in complete sympathy. As a general rule they might—so far as any communion of thought was concerned—have lived with a stone wall between them, whereas now not only their wishes coincided—for that had happened before—but also their hopes and expectations. Since the tardy realisation of her long-abandoned dream, it is probable that Mrs. M'Farrel was the happiest woman in England. Never had discarded lover been more lightly thrown overboard than had been Mr. Deyes—not by the daughter, but by the mother. He no longer existed for her—nobody existed but David, to whom was extended a pardon ample enough to have sufficed for two prodigal sons. To examine patterns, to study price-lists, to unpack the cardboard and deal boxes which the post now daily brought, and to tear the paper wrappings from wedding presents, would always have been happiness to Mrs. M'Farrel, but the thought of the household for whom all these dainty treasures were destined gave to the occupation a touch almost of ecstasy.

“Here is your jacket at last,” she was saying, on one of these happy occasions, the afternoon post having brought a fresh cargo which was being

unpacked in the dining-room after luncheon. "They've not put the right buttons, though. And this is sure to be the Brinsters' present; I wonder what they've chosen! Not another clock, I hope. What's in that box over there? Oh, it will be your going-off bonnet. Monica, darling, open it quickly; I'm dying to see you in it!"

There being no scissors at hand, Monica took a knife from the table to cut the string, but almost simultaneously uttered an exclamation. Either the knife had not been sharp enough or the string too tough, or she herself a little too impatient to see her bonnet, for instead of severing the string she had cut her finger rather badly.

"The jacket!" was Mrs. M'Farrel's instinctive shriek, as she snatched the pearl-grey garment from the chair on to which the blood was dropping fast. "How did you do that, Monica? We'll have to send for Dr. Drummond to dress it immediately, for fear of it's swelling; that would never do for next week."

"There is no need to send for him," said Monica, twisting her handkerchief round the wounded finger. "I meant to take a walk, at any rate. I shall just walk into St. Mallans and ask him to dress it."

And a quarter of an hour later she was on her way to the town, rather thankful to be out of the bustle for a little.

For the convenience of possible patients, and also occasionally of stray cats who came to steal scraps in the kitchen, the door of the doctor's house was generally to be found open, both day and night. Monica therefore walked in without difficulty, and

made her way unhindered to the consulting-room, with which she was—though only moderately—familiar. But the voice that said “Come in!” was not Dr. Drummond’s voice, and opening the door, with this reflection in her mind, she found herself face to face with a girlish apparition, which only after an instant she recognised as Jessie Alington.

A complete change of attire had wonderfully renewed her youth. When last Monica had seen her she had appeared to be weighed down, as it were, by the mass of her widow’s weeds, her youthful figure disguised under flowing draperies, her golden hair wellnigh covered by the austere widow’s cap. To-day the cap was gone, and nothing but the black pattern sprinkled on her light summer dress and the plain black ribbon around the straw hat she held in her hand, spoke of the once so ostentatious widowhood. Since the day she had flung her cap on to the table Jessie had not again put it on. Perhaps she had discovered that she had mourned long enough already; possibly she felt that her weeds had been too dearly paid for. The transformation was complete. Monica recognised it with a mixture of admiration and pain, that was followed by a vague alarm, as at some danger close at hand.

“I was looking for Dr. Drummond,” she said, awkwardly.

“Papa is not back yet. Do you want him?”

She spoke sharply, evidently as disagreeably moved by the meeting as was Monica herself.

“Yes. I have cut my finger rather badly, and I should like to have it properly dressed, so as not to take long——”

"Of course," interrupted the other quickly. "You will have to wear white kid gloves next week. It would never do to go to church in a bandage," and she laughed a little harshly.

Monica was not yet quite mistress of herself.

"Oh, it is no matter," she replied, confusedly. "Perhaps a piece of plaster will do, or else I can come back later when the doctor is at home."

"Let me see it," said Jessie, abruptly. "Perhaps I can do it for you."

"You?"

"Yes, I've seen papa do these things, and I've sometimes helped him. Let me see it."

With a curious feeling of reluctance Monica unknotted her handkerchief, and exposed the wounded finger.

"It is nothing," said Jessie, after a brief examination. "I can easily bind it up for to-day, and to-morrow you can ask papa, if you like. Stand near the light, please."

She laid her hat aside and fetched what she required from a drawer. Then there followed a minute or two of silence, during which, with bent head and set teeth—for the sight of fresh blood was always apt to affect her—she busied herself with Monica's hand.

"I did not know you were at St. Mallans," remarked Monica, at last, in order to break the irksome pause.

"I daresay not. I only arrived yesterday, and I am going away again to-morrow."

"Already?" Monica said, vaguely aware of a sensation of relief.

"Yes. I did not know St. Mallans was so gay, or I would not have come at all. A wedding seems to infect the air so terribly. I came here because there were too many people in London, but this is worse than London, it seems to me. That is why I am going away again."

Monica said nothing; she was wondering at the pointed bitterness of the tone. Believing, as she did, that Jessie had not loved David, she found no explanation for it.

"I thought you were not to be married till autumn," said Jessie, still without looking up.

"So it was settled, but David took it into his head——"

"Ah, so it was he? I thought so. Men always are so impatient. I've gone through that sort of thing myself, you know," and she laughed a little discordantly. "Is he here yet?"

"David? He is coming to-morrow."

The bandage gave a jerk that was almost painful, and a moment later Lady Alington released the hand she was holding.

"That is done, isn't it? Thank you greatly for your kindness. I suppose I can go now. There is nothing more to do, is there?" she repeated, as Jessie, instead of replying, looked at her fixedly, and with an expression she could not fathom.

"No, there is nothing more to do. But it is a beautiful afternoon," she added, unexpectedly.

"Beautiful," agreed the wondering Monica, going towards the door, with the one thought of getting away from those eyes. But Lady Alington moved quickly forward and got to the door before her.

"Why are you in such a hurry? Have you anything particular to do?"

She was standing so as almost to bar the passage as she put the question.

"Only to take a walk, but——"

"Supposing you take a row instead? I was just going to get out the boat when you came. It would be a change, and the bay is as smooth as a pond."

"I am afraid mamma might be waiting for me," said Monica, slowly, conscious of an intense dislike to the idea proposed.

"Since she thinks you are taking a walk she won't be waiting for you. You can't have any *objection*, surely, to come with me?" And her questioning eyes were fixed upon Monica, with an embarrassing directness.

"No, no, of course not," said Monica, hastily.

"Then you will come? It is lovely in the bay."

Her hand was on Monica's arm as she spoke, and at the touch Monica instinctively shrank a little back. It was her positive will to say "No," but the eyes that fixed her were so pressing, the tone so urgent, and the gesture so constraining, that she found herself saying "Yes," instead. A little shame at her own unreasonable reluctance had helped on the decision.

Presently, still with that strange sinking of the heart which had come over her at the first sight of Jessie, she was following her along the gallery and through the lower space of the tannery, to where the boat was moored to the steps. The bay was really not so very unlike a pond to-day, the long, sweeping ripple that followed their craft being cut

almost as clean as in crystal, as they floated out from the shadow of the house. Jessie, her face overcast by the broad brim of her straw hat, was rowing in the stern, while Monica, leaning over the side and trailing her ungloved right hand in the cooling water—it was a convenient way of avoiding her companion's eyes—was wondering at the unexpected and distasteful position in which she found herself. It was a good opportunity for the critical look which Jessie had resolved to give, and she gave it now, with greedy eyes, keen to note every detail and take in every possible defect. True, she had known this woman almost all her life, by sight at least, but until she knew that this was David's future wife she had never felt the need of looking at her closely. This was probably her last opportunity of doing so. To-morrow at this time she would be gone—where to she scarcely yet knew, aware only of the impossibility of staying in the place she had fled to only a few days after the meeting in the underground.

While Monica was concentrating her attention on the water, Jessie was jealously dissecting her face, and trying to discover what there was in it which could have made David forget her so quickly, after having remembered her so long. But merely looking was not enough. Even at the risk of betraying her own secret she wanted to probe a little deeper. She had not forgotten what Mrs. M'Farrel had said in the shop that day about Monica having loved her cousin since her babyhood, and curiosity on this point devoured her.

"You have known your cousin all your life, I suppose?"

The abruptly spoken question brought Monica's eyes up from the water.

"Very nearly so. I think I was five years old when I saw him first."

"I think it is a bad plan to marry anybody who has known you so long," said Jessie, with a hard smile. "You can't expect any illusions from so old an acquaintance."

"I don't want illusions," retorted Monica, a little defiantly. "I don't require them; they are only a name for blindness."

"But you want his love, I suppose; and blindness belongs to love, unless every one is agreed to draw Cupid all wrong. But perhaps you are sure of it, without the blindness. He wouldn't be so impatient, surely, if he did not care for you very much."

Monica flushed in silence, as once more she bent over the side. The too evident intention in every word spoken by the other was puzzling her more from minute to minute.

"Of course you expect to be very happy," began Jessie again, after a pause, speaking this time with artificial indifference.

"I hope to be so."

"And deserve it, probably," sighed Jessie, on some impulse of unwilling sympathy. "*You've* never done anything but sensible things in your life, I'm certain."

"Are you? I am not quite so sure." Monica was thinking of what had happened that day when Mr. Deyes had lunched in Park Street for the last time.

Jessie's regular oar strokes, followed as regu-

larly by the drip of the falling water, now filled the silence for some minutes. The sunshine lay hot and hazy upon the rocky shore and some half dozen dingy sails that cut the line of the horizon and the crazy old boat in which the two women who loved David, each after her own fashion, were paddling lazily about the bay.

"She loves him," said Jessie to herself, almost regretfully. "And I suppose that is how she has succeeded in making him love her. She isn't really beautiful—I daresay she is good—the sort of person of whom they say that they have the knack of making men happy. I suppose I ought to be glad, but I am not. No, no!" cried a rebel voice within her; "I don't want him to be happy with any one but me. What a wretch I am! How I wish I were dead! How I wish we were both dead! And how easy it would be too! Only to let the boat go against any of those rocks——"

At that very moment Monica looked up from her dabbling in the water, and called out sharply:

"Lady Alington. Quick! To the right! We are almost upon the rock!"

Jessie obeyed instinctively. The closeness of the danger which she had been so near invoking, had had the effect of sobering her a little. As they sheered off with scarcely a yard to spare she looked over her shoulder at the rough little crag against which they had wellnigh run.

"Oh, the Shrimp Island!" she said, somewhat contemptuously. "I had quite lost my bearings. That pile of stones has done me two bad turns in my life, and to-day would have been the third!

Only I'm not quite sure whether it wouldn't have been a good turn," she added, reflectively.

"And the other bad turns, what were they?" asked Monica. It seemed a safe subject of conversation.

"Oh, the first was ages ago—at the time of life when one keeps aquariums. I was collecting seaweed for mine that day, and my boat ran away and left me a prisoner here. I nearly shouted myself hoarse. Did your cousin never tell you the story?"

"David? No, what should he know of it?"

"As much as I do, since it was he who delivered me from my prison, just as I was beginning to think seriously of swimming. Some lucky chance" ("was it lucky, by the bye?" passed through Jessie's mind as she spoke) "had made him choose that afternoon for a row in the bay."

"I don't quite understand. Surely that was before your marriage?"

"Long before."

"Then are you not making a mistake?—since I only introduced David to you in London——"

"*You* only introduced him then, but he had introduced himself already on the occasion I tell you of, although I was ungrateful enough to have forgotten the circumstance until he reminded me."

"But why should he never have mentioned it?" said Monica, speaking her thought aloud.

Jessie shrugged her shoulders. "How should I know? Perhaps he wanted to forget the circumstance too."

"When was this exactly?" asked Monica, after

a rather long pause. "I mean the time he found you on the rock?"

"Let me see—nearly eight years ago."

Monica made a short mental calculation. That was the year that David had come to Craigie with the intention of proposing to her, and had gone away again without doing it.

"Was it in August?"

"I think it was," said Jessie, beginning in her turn to be surprised at this cross-examination, and quite unaware of having made anything like a revelation. Even supposing that Monica knew of her former relations to David, what difference could the exact date of the acquaintance make?

"How old were you then?"

"Sixteen, I suppose, since I'm twenty-four now?"

"I see," said Monica, and then again was silent.

She really was beginning to see, or at least to catch distant glimpses of all sorts of things, all of them unwelcome. Was it indeed possible that a casual remark had put her on the track of that mystery which she had always guessed at in David's life, and never been able to fathom? Jessie Alington was not an acquaintance of four years ago—this much was certain—it was not she who had introduced them, it was fate; and far, far earlier than she had supposed. But if he had known her for so long, was it not at least possible that he had loved her for the same length of time?—for Jessie at sixteen had been almost as desirable as she was now. The acceptance of this supposition would explain so many things: his sudden change of plans, his desire for independence—it all tallied exactly with

that capability of forming rapid resolutions, of which she knew her cousin possessed. But if this were so, then this meant that there had been no change of sentiment, no second love, and therefore a far deeper and more constant passion than the one she had reckoned with. The thought of it, and the thought of all that it implied in the past, even awed her a little. *If* it was so—she had no proof yet of its being so, beyond her own surmises, but she could easily get the proof. David would tell her the truth if she asked for it, and she certainly would ask for it. In one moment she had become aware of all the cowardice which had lain in her silence, in one moment shaken off the torpor into which for weeks past she had wilfully been letting herself sink. Her eyes were wide open now, and what she saw at her feet was an abyss into which she had very nearly stumbled—if it was true! Fortunately she would not have to wait long for the decision, since David was coming to-morrow.

What more was spoken between them before the boat again bumped against the landing-stage, Monica never knew, for her mind had remained, as it were, stranded upon their last subject of conversation. It never even occurred to her to ask what had been the second bad turn played by the Shrimp Island on Jessie, and so she had no chance of knowing that Lady Alington considered this piece of rock partly responsible for her marriage, since without the expedition which had taken place to it, on the eve of Sir Augustus's projected departure, it was more than probable that the baronet would never have been surprised into the audacity of a proposal.

As Monica was passing through the hall at home she could see through the open door her mother still blissfully busy in the dining-room, ankle deep in packing-paper and surrounded by open boxes.

"Gunter's box is come!" she called after her daughter, "and the cake is a triumph. Come and look at it, Monica, dear, I entreat of you!"

"Not to-day, mamma," said Monica, passing quickly on. "My finger hurts me, and I have brought home a headache with me."

"To-morrow I shall know," she said to herself, as she wearily reached her room.

CHAPTER XII.

It was in the early morning that David reached St. Mallans, too early to expect any one but servants to be astir, and yet too late to think of bed. What to do with oneself till breakfast was rather a problem, for even the grimmest man after the stuffiest night journey can't wash for four hours—and all David did to solve it was to lounge about the terrace and stare at the familiar sea-picture in the unfamiliar setting of an early summer morning. The sun indeed was up, but had not yet drunk the moisture from either rocks or grass; the world was still drenched in dew. Each rough point was luminous with a gloss never seen at mid-day; the tufts of sea-pinks that made gay the crevices were heavy-headed with big drops; even the sea-gulls, skimming past on their way to breakfast, had their feathers tipped with diamonds before they had ever made a dive. On the line of horizon the vapours of night still floated, blotting the distinctness of the outlook, as though water and sky, melting together in the darkness, had not yet succeeded in drawing definitely apart.

It was a scene of peace, but it failed to bring peace to the man who looked on it. Outward things had of late lost their significance for him. Since the day he had travelled in the underground

railway and been spoken to by Jessie without speaking to her, one question had pursued him, to the exclusion even of his momentary surroundings: "Supposing she loved him after all?". During the final interview at Allwood he had worked himself into the belief that she did not love him any longer, possibly had never really loved him, and to this belief he had since clung, as to the chief justification of his present course of action. But that day in the underground there had been something in her face, even in the scorn of her voice, which had seemed inexplicable by mere feminine spite, the hurt vanity of the woman who sees herself superseded. Supposing she loved him after all, and supposing he would only have had to wait a little longer? This was the thought against which he had to fight ever since, as against a deadly temptation. It was to get away from this thought that he had insisted on hurrying on the marriage, with the hope of finding peace in the irrevocable, the blind desire of cutting himself off from any inopportune weakness, any possible baseness.

If any woman deserved a man's unswerving faith, surely it was Monica. What an admirable mind was the one into which he had only lately penetrated. What a fund of that true kindness of heart which surely is the most lovable quality in woman, and what sound common-sense! And, still aimlessly pacing the terrace, David began a deliberate and somewhat unnecessarily elaborate contemplation of the qualities of his betrothed. He had got fairly deep into the subject, when high above his head a window opened in the sleeping house.

He looked up and recognised Monica at the casement, with a feeling as guilty as though he had not just been busy with her virtues. Perhaps it was the morning light that made her look so white—or the morning gown—for, although she was smiling, her face appeared older than usual.

"Awake already, Monica? I hope I did not disturb you?"

"No, I am always early, and to-day I am a little earlier than usual, that is all. It must be rather dull down there, surely? The drawing-room is not yet ready, I suppose, but you can come up here, if you like."

She was still smiling down at him, kindly and yet with something far-off in her face that was quite independent of the physical distance between them.

"Of course I like," said David, with a sense of relief, for he was tired of his own thoughts, and always felt better in Monica's presence than out of it.

She was waiting for him in her own sitting-room up-stairs, the one that had once been the nursery, and whose windows looked almost straight down upon the water.

"I believe I have spoiled your night, after all," said David, as he took her hand.

There was a curiously sunken look about her eyes, which seemed to speak of want of sleep; the usually so white skin had a dash of yellow in it to-day, giving to her face an unusual sallowness; even the nose looked a trifle sharper than usual. But whether she had slept well or not she had found time to do her hair; even at this early hour the pale gold bands lay as smooth as ever, and only the loose

morning dress seemed to speak of anything like haste. Monica's heart might possibly break, but her attire could never be slovenly.

"If you have spoilt my night it is no fault of yours," she said, with that same kind, but unaccountably distant smile which had momentarily puzzled him on the terrace. Sit down and tell me about the journey. Was it very stuffy?"

When she had heard that it was, she went on to inform herself of the friends last seen in London, his travelling companions on the way down, as well as various other items. Her voice was as quiet as usual, perhaps a little more studiously even, and if she now and then had to catch her breath for fear of getting out of the right key, David was not perspicacious enough, or too unsuspecting, to notice it.

Several minutes had passed before, having taken a long look out of the window, she asked in exactly the same tone in which she had enquired after the travelling companions, and, as it were, casually:

"By the bye, David, why did you never tell me that you had known Lady Alington before her marriage?"

If she had planned a trap for him to fall into she could not have been more successful, though in truth she had begun with commonplaces, not with the object of throwing him off his guard, but only of steadying her own nerves. At the sound of the name pronounced David's features, his whole attitude, in fact, had suddenly become rigid, all but his eyes, through which there passed a flash that was succeeded by a shadow. While answering Monica's last question he had been leaning forward

in his chair, with his crossed hands resting on his knees, and he remained in this attitude for several moments, as though transfixed by surprise at the unexpectedness of the question, forgetting to look away from the questioner's face. Her quiet grey eyes were full upon him, reading his expression as one reads a largely printed page.

She had to repeat her question, and then only he appeared to pull himself together. His attitude relaxed, and he leant back in his chair, perhaps the better to conceal his agitation.

"I don't think the subject ever came up for discussion," he remarked, stiffly, "or else, no doubt I should have mentioned it."

"But you let me suppose she was a stranger when I introduced you in London."

"Did I? She *was* almost a stranger, since I had only seen her once. I never denied having met her," he added, with a touch of sullenness.

"It is possible to be a stranger and yet also something more. Some meetings are so decisive, and I have an idea——"

"Put away your idea," he said, almost roughly. "I tell you that it was only since her marriage that I took rank as her acquaintance."

Monica looked at him long and earnestly, and the sallow pallor of her cheek began to be warmed by the rising blood.

"Is this fair to me, David? You are fencing with me, and exactly because you fence I see that there is something in my idea. If there is a story about you and Jessie Alington—I mean more of a story than what I already know—then you are *bound* to tell it me. Remember that I have a

right to ask. Have I deserved your confidence so little that you should refuse me the answer? I do not think so. There must be no secrets between us, David; no buried history."

He struggled for a moment longer, both against her quietly imperious eyes and against something within him of which he could not be certain whether it was the sense of right or of wrong, and then, yielding perhaps most of all to the unspeakable relief of disburdening himself of the truth, he gave her the quintessence of his story. What she said of there being no secrets between them appealed very directly to his own principles, and there was even a hope, it seemed to him, that a fuller confidence would bring them closer together, and would help him to love her in the same degree that he honoured and esteemed her. He knew her to be generous—she would forgive him for having loved another woman before her with such despairing tenacity. Sketchily and yet faithfully he told her everything, from the first meeting in St. Mallans bay to the final parting at Allwood, confining himself to a mere outline, yet letting her look far deeper into his soul than he was himself aware.

"I see," said Monica, when he was silent.

While he spoke, everything had grown slowly clear; all the mists had rolled away from the past, all the blanks had filled up. Like a road which can be overlooked from end to end, his whole inner life lay unscreened before her. She had found her then, in truth, the guiding genius of his life, the woman who had taken him from her once before; and there were not two, but one, and this one more formidable by far than a hundred could have been,

and exactly by reason of being only one. What could she attempt against such supremacy as this?

And yet the discovery was not all pain; there was a certain inward satisfaction in it too, curiously mingled with the shadow of impending desolation, for, in finding the successful woman, she had also found her hero again, intact at all points, deeply loving, true and constant even to tenacity, such as she had always insisted on imagining him. He was no love-sick amoret of lightly inflammable heart and easily shifting allegiance, he had never loved but one woman, as she had instinctively expected of him. Truly she had found him after long search, but only to lose him again, and this time for ever.

"I see," she said again, and then added after a moment: "Have you seen her since that day at Allwood?"

"Once only, and quite in passing." David got up uneasily from his chair and walked to the window. The meeting in the underground was the one thing which he had kept back. So little did he dare to dwell on the memory that he had shrunk even from an allusion.

"When was that?"

"About ten days ago."

"That was about the time that you decided to hurry on the marriage, was it not?"

"This is cross-examination with a vengeance!" said David, attempting to smile as he passed his handkerchief across his forehead, damp with the strain of the last few minutes.

"Ten days ago—I understand. Oh, my poor David! How you must have suffered!"

"It is over now. I feel ever so much better already, since you know the whole extent of my folly. Don't despair of me, I beg of you, Monica. Everybody goes mad for a bit, they say."

"Yours has been a rather big bit, though."

"Are you angry with me, Monica? Do you doubt me?"

"I doubt you so little that I refuse to be your accomplice any longer."

"In what?"

"In an infidelity—only a sham infidelity, it is true, although you take it for a real one; but the one sits as badly on you as the other, which means in plain English, that I am not going to marry you." And she looked at him straight, with a brave but tortured smile upon her faintly tinted lips.

"Monica!"

He veered round from the window in unfeigned consternation. "You cannot mean that?"

Monica's calmness had duped him so entirely that he had expected anything but this. What he felt in this first moment was not at all like joy, rather a bewildered alarm at perceiving that the hand which he had instinctively clung to amid the shipwreck of his hopes was drawing itself away from him. As yet he thought of nothing but of keeping hold of that hand, for fear of being cast adrift again by himself on the wilderness of stormy waters.

"Don't you know me well enough to know that I always mean what I say?"

"But that was not why I told you."

"No, but it was why I made you tell me."

"But what have I done to be dismissed?" he

cried in bewilderment. "Is it because I have loved another woman? You will find no other man who is not guilty there."

"It is not because you *have* loved her, but because you love her *still*—or do you deny it? Say only 'No.' I promise you David, that if you deny it to my face, I will believe you, and will marry you."

During the minute's pause that followed, David gazed back almost helplessly into her face. Twice he tried to speak, and yet ended by turning back to the window without having spoken.

"I knew it," said Monica, almost serenely, "and that is why I refuse to be your accomplice in a crime, for it would be a crime for you to marry any one except Jessie Alington."

"She does not love me," said David, heavily.

"She does. I have my proofs. She would never hate me so if she did not love you."

"How do you know she hates you?" he quickly asked. "You cannot have seen her?"

"Never mind how I know; I tell you I have my proofs."

"Then why should she refuse me so persistently?"

"That is what I cannot explain to you, though I think I understand. No man can see more than the outside of our little scruples, and one requires to see the inside in order to understand. The very scruples prove that she loved you, because if she had not loved you she would not have felt so guilty."

"It can be no matter whether she loves me or not," said David, conscious of a rising excitement,

"since I have given her my word that I shall never ask for her love again, and I mean to keep it."

"Then she shall ask you. Leave it only to me. You can trust your happiness to me, can you not, David?"

"I cannot take it from you," he said, quickly.

"Why not? What I am doing is very simple, after all. It is I who am the impediment now, and I am removing it, that is all."

"No, no!" cried David, with wild eyes. "It is too much! It cannot be!"

He made two steps back into the room, and on to the first chair he came to let himself fall heavily, with his arms on the back and his face buried in them.

"It is too much," he muttered, in a smothered voice.

What he felt at that moment was not gratitude, it was more like resentment. This generosity was so great as to be almost oppressive: it seemed to be weighing him to the ground. Beside her he felt so small, so despicable and weak—all things that he did not like feeling. It was difficult even to forgive her for making him feel so. Every fibre that was noble in him revolted against the release thus forced upon him, and that was to be bought at the price of another's happiness. At the thought of all that this woman had already suffered for him, and must be suffering now, and would yet suffer in the future, the sense of obligation became so intolerable as almost to resemble despair. With the last remnant of mental strength he was fighting against the liberty which he now knew that he had always thirsted for, but which to her meant desolation, and

all the more fiercely did he fight because of the joy that had given one bound within him, but which he had savagely ordered to lie still, as one commands some untamed beast.

"It cannot be, Monica," he groaned. "I will not leave you, I will not give you up."

And in the conflict of his soul, for the first time since boyhood, he found himself suddenly on the point of tears.

While he was lying thus with his face still hidden, he felt a touch upon his shoulder and knew that she was beside him.

"Listen to me, David," she said a little tremulously now, but very distinctly. "You don't seem to have understood me rightly. I was not giving you a choice, I was announcing to you a resolve. I am not very quick to come to resolutions, but I don't like altering them when they are fixed—and this one is quite fixed—be sure of that. It was not an easy thing to do, I admit, for it is not my own happiness alone that is involved, it is also mamma's. I know that I shall come very near to breaking her heart, and that is a serious thing to do; can you imagine that I should set about it without having weighed everything carefully, and viewed it from all points of view? And has it not occurred to you that my point of view may be different from yours? Are not my feelings to be considered too, as well as yours? I was content to be the woman you loved last in life, the one to whom you would come when more stormy adventures were over, but I am not content to be taken either out of *pique* against another, or out of pity for myself, knowing all the time that your heart is in too sure a keeping ever to be-

long to me. Some one else I might hope to gain in time, to steal him away from his first love, but not you, David, not you—I know you too well to believe it. Your first love will also be your last. You wrong yourself in imagining that you could ever love me.”

She drew in her breath for a moment and waited, but he did not look up.

“If only I could act well enough,” she went on, more lightly, “and had more of the heroic in my composition, I suppose the best plan would have been to tell you that I was tired of you, and to jilt you in all form. It would have been easier for you, but I have no talents in that direction, and I should not like to destroy your trust in women generally. I hope you will believe me without that. You won’t force me to accept Mr. Deyes, will you, just to convince you that I am in earnest?” And she laughed an almost genuine laugh. “Come, David, are you persuaded?”

He moved uneasily beneath her touch. “And you?” was all the answer he made, just audibly.

“I? Oh, I am not going to do anything very desperate. I had no thoughts of hanging myself up before that day in London when you spoke to me, so there would be no sense in doing so now, since I am back at the same point. Never fear for me; I have plenty to live for.”

“It is all so useless!” said David, abruptly raising his head and staring with dark, rebellious eyes before him. “Why should it all have been? Why should you have suffered so uselessly?”

“Not quite useless, David, since apparently it wanted this to make her discover that she loved

you more than she feared her scruples. Without your will I have helped you to your happiness—for I am sure your happiness is coming—that is enough for me. And you have helped me too. Before this—what shall I call it?—episode in our lives, it is just possible that I might have allowed myself to be persuaded by mamma into some other marriage. You see I am so tired of disappointing her, and she was so tired of being disappointed. Now this cannot happen to me. You have helped me to be true to myself.”

David’s chin sunk on his breast. Was it not almost shameful not to love her? Was she not the greater, the nobler woman of the two? Stronger, truer, more perfectly devoted, and could she not love better? And she was fair, too; who could say she was not fair as she stood now before him, her pale cheek glowed through with a hidden flame, the marks of weariness on her face transfigured by emotion? And was not the other full of faults, capricious, headstrong, hard to guide? Ah—but she had eyes that were like sunlit water and hair that glowed in a scale of tones, and the movements of a goddess of the deep, and she was just Jessie and no other, and no other but Jessie would ever satisfy the passionate craving of his heart, as with a new sense of shame he almost reluctantly recognised.

Monica took her hand from his shoulder as gently as she had put it there.

“I have one favour to ask of you. I suppose you will be going away now—Craigie would scarcely be comfortable for you after to-day, but *before* you go I want you to do me a service.”

"Any service imaginable!" said David, with unnecessary fervour, grasping at the hope of some sort of atonement.

"Do you promise?"

"I swear it."

"Well, it is only to deliver a note, which I am going to write, into the hands of the addressee."

His face fell. "Is that all?"

"Yes, and quite enough. Wait there a minute; you shall have it immediately."

She went quickly to the table. While her pen scratched over the paper he paced the room, struggling for composure.

In three minutes she was again beside him, holding out a closed envelope. He glanced at the address and started back.

"Remember that you have promised," said Monica, firmly.

"I did not know that she was here—you did not tell me."

"It was not necessary. I tell you now."

"If you have——" he began, with rising colour.

"I have said nothing that you could disapprove of. I have not pleaded in your name—only told her that my engagement is broken, and also the reason. Your honour is safe. Surely you trust me?"

"I do," said David, as he held out his hand. He could not have said more. The discovery of Jessie's near vicinity had again confused his thoughts.

"You are also to wait while she reads it," said Monica, peremptorily. "It is the only return I ask you for—for what I have done to-day. You cannot want that it should have been done in vain."

And you had better go quickly, for she is leaving to-day."

He went, almost reluctantly, and in deep shame. Perhaps, after all, he might have loved her in time?

Jessie, with her hat on and her bag beside her, was buttoning her gloves in the middle of the room, lending an ear meanwhile for the return of Eliza, whom she had despatched for a cab, when the door opened without any previous knock, and not Eliza but David came in.

"I promised to give you this," he said, bluntly, while she stood dumb with astonishment, the rich colour spreading over neck and forehead.

Still in silence she took the note, looked at the handwriting, and then back again at the bearer, coldly and questioningly, as though to say: "You have done what you promised, you can go."

"I promised also to wait while you read it," he said, in the same tone, and then walked straight to the window and began studying the back yard and the sea view beyond with an attention that was curious, considering that he saw nothing. In his temples the blood was hammering, in his veins it was coursing madly, and each drop was a tongue which screamed to him that he had been a fool five minutes ago to suppose that he could ever love any woman but this one.

Presently, after he knew not how many minutes or hours, there was a touch on his arm, just as there had been half an hour ago, but this time it thrilled him from head to foot. Turning slowly, he saw close before him Jessie's face, looking as yet only scared and rather white.

"Is this true?" she asked, pointing to the letter. "You are not going to marry her?"

"She is not going to marry me," said David, grimly, still looking at her with something like anger in his eyes, as at the cause of the humiliation whose smart was still so recent.

"Oh David, how is it you could not love her?" cried Jessie, and impetuous tears choked her voice.

"I don't know how it is," said David, still a little stolidly, but already scarcely able to keep down the rising tide of almost delirious joy that was threatening every instant to carry all before it. "I suppose——"

But she checked him with a movement of her hand, raising it quickly as though she meant to lay it on his mouth.

"No, no, don't say it, David! You said you would not, and you must not. It is my turn now—she is right. I have behaved unworthily, idiotically, and I deserve this."

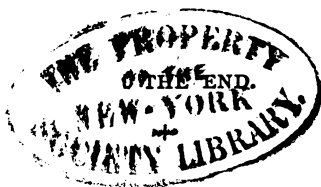
David was not going to say it, and would not have said it though he were on the rack; it was the fear of seeing her one chance of reparation taken from her which had made her think he was growing weak.

"I don't know whether *you* can forgive me," she went on, breathlessly, "but I know that I can scarcely forgive myself. And I don't know, either, whether you still want me—I'm not worth wanting, it seems to me, after—after all I've made you go through. But if you do, David," she faltered, standing before him hesitating and yet resolute, with tears in her eyes and blushes on her cheeks that would have graced a Magdalene—"if you do

—well, here I am! You shall know that I belong to you, and always have belonged to you. You can say No, if you like, remember! I will not reproach you; it shall be my punishment, and I will bear it!”

But David did not say No.

A dead man it had been who first stopped the way, and after that a living and loving woman. The road was clear at last, but it had cost a victim.



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